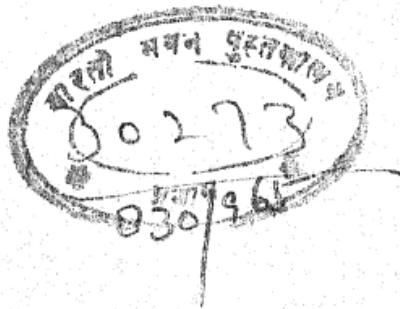


NO SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

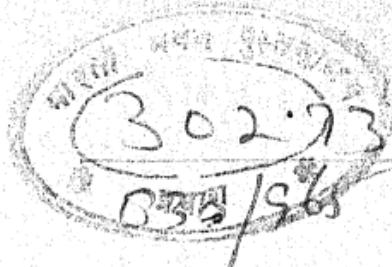
by

MAURICE GRIFFITHS



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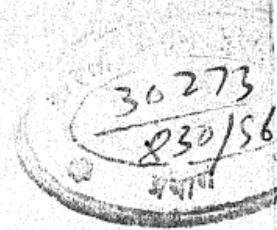
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MOUNT PLEASANT PLYMOUTH



To

A young lady in Atlanta, Georgia,
for unwittingly suggesting the title,
this book is dedicated.

WITH the exception of historical names
all characters in this book are entirely
fictitious and have no connection with
any persons known to the author.



CHAPTER I

A SLIGHT tremor ran through the ship, its passing marked by a chorus of squeaks that travelled down the passageway. The floor of the cabin heaved slowly over to port, hovered there at a gentle slant while everything trembled under the impulse of the engines, and as slowly slid back to incline the other way.

The man raised his head from the book he was reading and looked up at the black circle of the porthole. The cluster of stars that had been moving up and down, up and down that opaque disc when he had turned in an hour before was no longer there; not a star was visible now, and the sky was black as velvet. With a restless movement he adjusted the lumpy pillow at his back, settled more comfortably in the coffin-like bunk, and returned to the pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

But somehow he could not lose himself in the book. All the skill of satire and hyperbole in Dickens' latest novel could not hold his attention to-night, and more than once he caught himself staring above the printed page at his coat as it swung gently to and fro on the bulkhead facing him. While he lay there with the back of his head cupped in his hands the yellow light of the wall lamp cast his silhouette on the wall beside him. It revealed a tall head with a good width behind the temples where his dark, close-cut hair had begun to recede like the tide ebbing from the shore. He had a straight nose with wide nostrils that in a less matured face would look pugnacious while his eyes, deep set beneath almost black brows, were those of a thoughtful man. In the daytime

there would be a distinct blue in them that could come and go with changes in expression, and his mouth, a little pursed now as though his thoughts were of regrets, held a promise of whimsicality, even a boisterousness that flitted around the corners of the straight lips. There was a firmness about his clean-shaven chin and a square set to his head on powerful shoulders that spelt an assertive, even a grim, disposition when circumstances asked for it. At thirty-four Roscoe Torrence might have passed for a man five or six years older, until the boisterous side of his character swept uppermost and his whole face took on that whimsical, mischievous expression that had already led its owner into trouble.

Eight bells sounded distantly from somewhere above and reminded him that it must be midnight. All lights should have been put out in the cabins at eleven and he wondered idly why Quirk, the little steward, had not seen the glimmer of his own lamp beneath the cabin door.

Roscoe dropped the book on to the floor and turned to thump his pillow into a less knobbly mass. Then he reached up and turned the lamp wick right down. As the flame flickered and died he settled down into his bunk in the stuffy darkness with the steady throb of the engines in his ear.

It had only been his characteristic impatience that had made him take this Royal Mail packet at Southampton instead of coming by a sailing vessel which he could have joined nearer his home in the Thames. Even though the *Atalanta* was a first class ship and one of the largest iron paddle steamers afloat, and she would get him to Pará weeks ahead of any sailing ship, he would still have preferred to make the voyage under sail alone had it not been for his consuming impatience. Once he had made up his mind Roscoe invariably followed a course of action with the least possible delay. When he had come to that decision to make a complete break, he had lost no time

in selling his five-year-old practice to the *locum* and setting out to combine the study of tropical diseases in Brazil with an entirely fresh start. And nothing had suited him but to take the first ship that left for the Amazon.

For three weeks since they had left Southampton and punched down Channel against a wet south-wester, he had enjoyed the confined life of shipboard with a hundred other passengers. If something within him seemed to have gone dead in his feelings for women, and he had generally avoided anything but the most formal contact with the wives and daughters of passengers aboard, they in their turn had been intrigued by his aloofness; and the tall, clean-shaven doctor was almost a daily speculation over the knitting circle gathered on the main deck.

In the darkness of the little cubby-hole that posed as a first class cabin Roscoe lay that night and stared at the black circle of sky that filled the porthole. They were just south of the Line, and although the wind had risen at nightfall it was blowing on the starboard bow while this side of the ship seemed airless and stifling. As he lay there he could feel the bunk throbbing with the impact of an occasional sea, while every now and then the muffled beat of the paddlewheels hesitated as the ship's bow rose to a steeper swell than usual. Roscoe wondered whether it was blowing up for a gale and whether the engineer would have to stop the engines once more to let the bearings cool. They had had a lot of trouble with the engines coming down Channel against that first "blow", and a number of the passengers had remained uneasy and grumbled ever since. But the *Atalanta* was a nearly new ship—this was only her fourth voyage out to the River Plate—and if the engines did break down again or even the boilers run out of coal, she had a good crew and masts and yards and sails to carry her two-thousand-ton bulk across the Atlantic. The lift and scend of the bunk beneath him as the ship shouldered her way over a sea,

the regular swish of his coat against the bulkhead, even the thudding of the paddlewheels outside the stout iron hull combined to bring on a welcome sleepiness.

Roscoe sat up with a curious sense that something had awakened him. His cabin was still pitch dark and no sign of dawn yet showed through the dim circle of the port-hole. There was a strange, ominous quietness that seemed to bear down on his consciousness, as though something were about to happen at any moment. Then he realized what it was: the engines had stopped.

The ship rolled slowly until he had to steady himself against the bunk board, then she rolled away to starboard, creaking wildly down the passageway. There must be quite a big sea running outside, he thought, but because his cabin was on the lee side he could hear no sound except the occasional wash of a sea along the ship's side and the regular creak of the woodwork. His cabin still felt insufferably close, and, now that he was fully awake, he decided to go for a turn on deck to breathe some fresh air. While he slipped on a pair of trousers and a coat he sniffed the air. Somebody in a nearby cabin he thought, was smoking some pretty foul tobacco—quite against the rules too, at night.

When he opened the door into the dimly lit passageway the smell was suddenly more pungent and he felt his eyes smarting. Smoke seemed to be everywhere and the rays from the lamp at the end of the passage looked dim.

At the bottom of the companionway he nearly collided with his steward.

"What's up, Quirk?" he asked thoroughly alarmed. "Ship on fire or is it something wrong in the engine-room?"

The little man touched his forelock and shot an uneasy glance at his passenger.

"Nothin' much, sir," he said, "one o' the bearin's got a bit warm-like. But we ain't wakin' all the passengers,

sir. If I was you sir," he added confidentially, "I'd go back to me cabin. There ain't no alarm and I don't want me other passengers wakin' up, see?"

"There's a hell of a lot of smoke, isn't there?" Roscoe said sniffing.

The steward lowered his voice: "It's only the wind, sir. It's blowing hard, see, and it brings it all down 'ere. There ain't no alarm sir."

"Well I think I'll take a turn on deck," said Roscoe moving off. "It's hot down here."

Quirk made a quick movement, half barring the companionway.

"If you don't mind, sir, I'd stay below if I was you. Captain's orders, sir."

"Captain's orders?" Roscoe stared. "Why Quirk I've been on deck the last three or four nights when it was so warm."

"I know sir. But the captain's said no passengers to go on deck until they've got the engines goin'."

A door opened half-way down the passage and an indignant voice demanded the steward. Quirk sighed. "That'll be Colonel Bland. Excuse me, sir."

Roscoe was dismayed to see how soon the little man was lost to view in the smoke. He heard Colonel Bland exclaim: "Then why in heaven's name, man, wasn't I called before? Don't you know that there are women and children on this boat?" and a moment later a woman's voice suddenly screamed. It seemed to be the prelude to a medley of sounds from the passengers' cabins—the voices of frightened caged animals—and he hurried up the companionway to the deck.

A fierce blast of wind caught the door as he opened it and banged it behind him. He stood for a moment with his back to the deckhouse, facing aft. A moderate gale was blowing, moaning in the rigging with a deep sonorous note, and he could hear every now and then the

dull thud of a sea under the paddle sponsons as the *Atalanta* rolled. Against the velvety gloom of the heavens he could just make out the jigger mast with its spars and tracery work of rigging. Two trips in a Thames spritsail barge and his love of shipping in London's river had taught him enough to know that the *Atalanta* was lying hove-to under her topsails and spanker.

From somewhere forward, behind him in fact, he could hear men shouting their voices echoless as the wind swept the words away, and he walked around the deck-house, balancing himself easily to the slow scend of the ship.

The sight that met his eyes made him gasp. Forward of the spidery bridge that stretched across the ship from the top of one white paddlebox to the other, a sheet of flame suddenly leapt up. Like a red tongue it swept away to leeward licking at the rigging of the mainmast. In its light a lurid pall of smoke billowed away across the backs of the seas.

Without hesitating Roscoe ran forward to join the black figures silhouetted against the red glare. The ship's officers and one or two of the crew had formed a bucket chain along the deck. As he took up his position in the line he could hear a deep reverberating roar under his feet. The fire, evidently begun somewhere in the paint locker forward of the engine-room, appeared to be working aft in the 'tween decks.

"Where are the fire hoses?" he shouted at the man next to him. His words were carried away by the gale.

"Forward—with the crew," the seaman told him, "they're trying to get aft now. Look there."

Roscoe saw a small group of figures hovering on the deck between the forecastle head and the main deck, waiting for a chance to rush the flames. But the fire had the ship in its grip and already amidships it was a roaring furnace. The crew were driven back towards the fore-

castle and, fascinated, Roscoe saw two of the figures reel and stagger back into the hungry flames.

The deck planks already felt burning to his feet and the pitch was oozing and bubbling with minute jets of smoke. The flames were creeping aft towards the port paddlebox and soon the lee rigging of the mainmast was burning in festoons of fire. The glare lit up the foam that flecked the backs of the seas as they raced away into the darkness, and every now and then a shower of sparks would scatter away to leeward like the tail of a crimson comet.

Over and over again Roscoe passed on the wooden buckets and watched the futile efforts as the last man in the line hurled the water into the flames. But each time he was forced to retreat another step. The hopelessness of the situation began to dawn on Roscoe as he saw how the flames had cut off the crew on the foredeck, leaving the officers to deal with the fire and the passengers.

Above the roar of the gale women's voices shrieked. They sounded like the cries of seagulls on the wing. Half a dozen figures were crouching under the lee of the deckhouse, clinging to each other, their faces blobs of white as they stared at the lurid glare of the fire.

"God blast them" roared the mate's voice. "Mr. Vining, where are you, Mister?"

"Here, sir." The heavily bearded third mate stepped from the bucket line near Roscoe.

"Get those passengers below, Mister," bellowed the mate. "Get 'em in the saloon and for God's sake keep 'em there before they try to rush the boats."

Even as he spoke there was a sudden rush of men and women on deck. From the door of the deckhouse they poured up like ants driven from a hole, and the cries of the womenfolk rang plaintively above the storm. Frantic, some rushed from side to side while others crouched miserably by the lee rail gazing at the inky water as it welled up against the hull. In vain the two mates tried

to shepherd them below again. They were mobbed, clutched by frenzied women, driven here and there, helpless in the face of panic that now spread through the passengers like the fire that roared below.

On the bridge above them Roscoe could see the stocky figure of Captain Sparrow, his coat pressed against his knees by the force of the wind, his feet braced apart against the rolling of the ship. Turning aft the captain cupped his hands and began to shout orders:

"Clew up your main tops'l and spanker, Mister; have emergency sea boats ready for lowering away."

Emergency sea boats. Roscoe knew they had two boats always ready for launching in case of any person falling overboard. He wondered how long it would take to launch the lifeboats, if they were needed. There they were, lashed bottom up on their cradles—and the crew, who knew how to handle their tackles, were forward, cut off by the sea of fire.

While the sails were being clewed up, flogging in the wind with reports like distant artillery fire, Roscoe heard the beat of the paddlewheels once more.

"The Old Man's putting her head before the wind," one of the seamen shouted in his ear. "It'll keep the flames from working aft."

Even as he spoke the ship's head paid off and, rolling deeply for a moment or two as she came round, she began to run before the gale. The flames and sparks now swept forward, taking hold of the foremast and licking past the rigging. With a feeling of cold horror Roscoe heard the shrieks of the men marooned in the forecastle and tried not to imagine their fate. But the fire at least appeared to be checked on its way aft, and he wondered whether even yet they would be able to master it. Surely, an iron shell like this fine steamer would not burn like a wooden ship.

At this moment the black squad tumbled up from below, the stokers bare to the waist, choking and coughing

with the acrid smoke still in their lungs. A cloud of smoke billowed out of the engine-room fiddley, and within a minute Roscoe was aghast to see the first tongue of red flame lick the coamings of the hatch. A scream rang out from somewhere down there in the bowels of the ship, and he shuddered as he thought of what it must be like for any one trapped in the ship's bowels now.

With the gale astern of her and with her engines pounding her onward at twelve knots, and no one left alive below to stop them; with the whole of her forward part a sea of blazing fire, and the sides of her iron hull an incandescent red that hissed clouds of steam as the seas raced alongside; with her crew suffocated and burnt in the forecastle and her officers and passengers helpless on the after deck, the *Atalanta* was racing, a wild uncontrollable shell of fire and terrified humanity through the night.

The men gave up passing the buckets. Such pathetic dashes of water only burst into steam and seemed to encourage the fire to work aft underfoot. The passengers were tearing at the boat lashings with bleeding hands, while women cowered, whimpering and sobbing, against the deckhouse, holding children in their arms lest death should strike too soon. One of the boats had already been turned right side up, and immediately it was filled with a mob of frantic men and women. In the rush the weaker ones gave way, crushed and battered, to lie bleeding and silent beneath the trampling feet. Even as he watched, Roscoe saw the falls of the boat tackle hauled by inexpert hands, the boat rise off its skids, and turn over outboard. Like dolls falling out of an opened box, the passengers tumbled down into the sea, into the black mill race that swept past the hull.

The captain's voice bawled down from the bridge.

"Keep those passengers away from the boats, Mr. Taylor. Wait till we stop her before launching them."

While the chief officer, a big man with a ruddy face fringed by whiskers forced his way into the crowd that milled beside the long boat, the captain rang the engine-room for "Stop". But he did not know that by now the engine-room was a creeping inferno, that down there in the bowels of the stricken ship the chief engineer, the only one to remain at his post ready to stop the pounding engines when the order came from the bridge, paid no heed to the jangling bell. He was already a shapeless, charred form.

And with the boilers in the midst of a sea of fire and the water in them running lower and lower, the *Atlanta* raced on through the night, her great wheels threshing the waves into foam that flashed crimson in the glare, her burning masts tottering against the black sky, her tall smokestack a glowing red where it met the deck.

Another boat was being lifted from its skids, clumsily moved by maddened people who could not see what would happen once the boat touched that racing sea, how it would spin on its tackles like a fish on a line. They worked feverishly only to get away from this holocaust.

"Keep away from that boat! Get back there."

Roscoe could hear the first mate's voice above the clamour, and saw him forcing his way through the crowd. Close to Roscoe a man with terrified eyes and clawing hands dragged a woman from the gunwale of the boat and began to climb inside. The woman reeled against Roscoe, sobbing, her hair falling down her back and her full travelling skirt trampled underfoot. Roscoe leapt at the man, caught him by the shoulders and, turning him round, drove his fist full into the white face. The man staggered back into the crowd, making a lane as he fell.

With his blood up now, feeling at last that he could do something useful, Roscoe helped to drive back the passengers while the two officers strove to clear the boat tackles. Although the wind was keeping the fire on deck

to the forward half of the ship, below decks it had nothing to stay its course, and slowly and surely it was working aft, cracking the paint on the doors, spurting up through the deck seams and belching forth with a renewed roar from ventilators.

A sudden rush of maddened beings, scarcely human in their frenzied terror, bore Roscoe down and surged up to the boat. Mr. Taylor and the second mate were driven aside and the long boat was lifted bodily out of its skids. Almost before it had swung outboard it was full of a seething mass of people. Then the tackles screamed and the boat dropped into the sea with a run.

Horror-stricken, Roscoe saw it hit the water, bounce up so that the after tackle became unhooked and trailed clear, and then settle down on to the racing stream at the end of the forward tackle. Immediately the boat capsized, hurling its occupants far out into the sea, and then began to turn over and over, dashing over the wake, bouncing up and down, now bottom up, now gunwales up, and crashing against the ship's iron side. Soon the tackle carried away and the boat disappeared into the darkness where its occupants struggled in the white-crested seas.

"The boilers will burst any minute!"

The cry sent a shock through the groups of people remaining on the deck, and if the authority of the first mate's voice had gained some control, it was now thrown to the winds. Another rush was made to the last boat—the ship's gig. Roscoe dashed into the mob and drove his fist into a couple of faces.

"Keep back, God damn you," he snarled at them. "Let the officers launch the boat."

But he was thrust aside, to find himself reeling against his steward. Jerry Quirk was holding a heavy wooden breaker in his arms, and looking on with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Blimey if we ain't got a fair choice, sir," he said with

a lugubrious grin. "We either go up when the b'ilers bust, or drahns in the boats."

As a reaction from the surrounding horrors Roscoe could not suppress a chuckle.

"But what the devil have you got there, Quirk?" he asked, tapping the small barrel.

"It's the water cask belonging to the gig, sir. I managed to get it 'arf filled before it got too 'ot for me in the pantry, sir. 'Ush, 'ere comes the captain, sir."

As he spoke Captain Sparrow passed them, his face set above the open collar of his bridge coat and despair in his eyes. They watched him walk up to the helmsman and take the spokes of the wheel.

"You go and save yourself with the others," he said in a calm voice. "I'll stay by the ship."

When the passengers heard that they scrambled round the gig once more and turned it over out of its skids. The boat threatened to take charge and fall overboard bottom up, and Roscoe rushed forward to help hold it back. With his shoulders against the boat's planking he began to heave, but a sudden surge of people drove him backward. He stepped back, his foot went into space; his hand grabbed the rail, clutched air, and a moment later he struck the water with a heavy splash.

When his head broke air he found himself instinctively swimming after the *Atalanta*. But with no one to stop her engines and her paddlewheels still threshing the water into foam and the gale of wind helping to drive her onward, the ship continued to race through the night. From this stern view of her she seemed to be silhouetted against a bright crimson cloud that flickered and flashed every now and again into a sea of sparks. He idly noticed that the group of little black figures were attempting to launch the gig once more.

"The damn fools," he exclaimed, "she'll only capsize like the other boat."

A long swell lifted him up until the hissing crest caught hold of him, and while the spray blinded him he suddenly realized how hard the wind was blowing. No wonder it had blown the fire over those poor devils in the forecastle, he thought.

Then suddenly he became angry.

"What a way to die; to be left to drown from a steamer that nobody can stop!"

He looked after the *Atalanta* again, and, even as he watched, the deck suddenly appeared to rise in the air above her, the funnel tilted to one side and the jigger mast began to tumble overside as a great mushroom of flame and sparks spread outward, to subside in a rain of fire.

It was a second or two before the muffled roar of the explosion reached him, by which time there was little to be seen of either the ship or the fire.

"My God," was all he said as he mechanically trod water, "the boilers!"

With his eyes blinded by the glare of the sun, like red-hot balls in their sockets, Roscoe leaned forward, steady-ing himself with his hand against the boat's thwart. His drawn face worked with the effort to see more clearly. When he moved the sores on his flesh clung painfully to his shirt where the floor boards of the boat had been chafing him, and he stared stupidly at his companion, noticing for the first time, it seemed, his emaciated appearance. The man's cheeks were grey and drawn in about his mouth, his lips were black and swollen and protruded like a nigger's, his arms and chest showed lean and bony through the rents in his blackened shirt. But it was his eyes that gave him such a haunted expression—deeply sunk, bright, glittering, unnaturally large, and encircled by dark rings. While he stared the man closed his eyes wearily and the lids gave his face a blind expression like

a statue as he leaned back against the after thwart, his head resting against the gunwale.

A sudden fear caught hold of Roscoe. If Quirk died first he would be left alone, the only living thing. Whatever else happened he must not let Quirk die, he could not bear to be left alone in this boat with a dead thing hundreds of miles from any land.

In his panic he reached forward and shook the little Cockney by the arm, his uncontrollable lips trying to formulate words. The man opened his eyes again and forced a grin that hurt his mouth, twisting his face into a horrible grimace, like some wretch under torture in a medieval dungeon. Then he seemed to fall asleep again, and Roscoe sank back, to stare dully at the empty water breaker.

Even his powerful frame had become emaciated from the effects of the sun and starvation. As he lay there against the thwart Roscoe tried to recollect how long they had been here like this. Seven, ten, was it twelve days or longer? He could not remember how long it could be. They had ceased to keep count after the first few days, and somehow time had come to mean nothing to them but alternate periods of burning sun and perishing cold darkness since the last drop of water had been finished. There had once been a shower of rain, he remembered, during a sudden squall when the wave caps were blown across the boat in spray that hurt. He recalled how Quirk and he had tried to catch the rain, and how bitterly disappointed they had been to find the heaven-sent moisture mixed with the salt of the flying spray.

With an effort he tried to remember what had caused them to be the only two men in a boat at sea with no protection from the fierce glare of the sun, and no food or water. Gradually, by puckering his brow until the effort seemed to hurt his brain, it came back to him, like a series of kaleidoscopic pictures, the horrors of the fire, the sudden plunge into the cold water, the last view of the

maddened *Atalanta* as she fled before the gale, and that flash of fire and sparks that was the end.

He remembered that it had been dark when the *Atalanta* blew up and there was a strong gale blowing, but when he found himself in the boat the sun was blistering his back through his thin shirt and the wind had died, leaving a gigantic swell like a series of moving hills and valleys on which the sun glinted in a myriad blinding flashes. He had learned from Quirk later how the little man had been the only occupant in the gig when the explosion blew the boat into the water and how some time later he found Roscoe almost unconscious clinging to a piece of grating. It was strange that no other boats or passengers had been seen. The ocean seemed to be as empty as the outer darkness.

They had had five hard biscuits which Quirk had happened to stuff into the pocket of his trousers when he had left the galley, and they began by dividing these scrupulously. But the biscuits had been soaked in sea water and were horribly salty: so much so that on the fourth day they threw the last one overboard. Their gums became too sore and swollen to make any impression on the hard-caked saltiness, and if they crushed the biscuits by hitting them with the thole pin, the dry powder only made their thirst all the more intolerable.

The oak breaker that Quirk had managed to heave into the gig just before the explosion occurred, leaked badly, and do what they could they had been unable to save more than a little of the precious fresh water. They had licked the last drop from the bung-hole days since, and wept bitterly because their tongues had become too swollen to reach round inside where there was still a little moisture, and their hands too weak to tear apart the iron bands that bound the little barrel.

There was no mast in their gig, only two pairs of oars and four thole pins, and at first they spent the weary

hours in rowing, taking their direction roughly from the sun and the stars, and heading east. Although Quirk had no idea at all where they were, nor just how far off land might be, Roscoe had heard from Mr. Grimes, the third mate, that day the gale had sprung up, that his latest sight had put them about six hundred miles from the coast of Benguella.

Roscoe had decided that if they only headed east and continued to row long enough they must fetch up on the West Coast of Africa somewhere. But the twenty-foot gig was a heavy boat, and how long it would take them to row six hundred miles at this rate of perhaps thirty miles a day was too horrible a calculation for his mind to grasp.

Exhaustion, hunger, and, beyond anything conceivable, the torment of thirst overcame him and they had telapsed into the bottom of the boat in despair. Once or twice Quirk tried to rally some spark of hope, some droll and pathetic reference to their still being alive.

"Just fink, sir," he said once, staring lugubriously at the heaving horizon, "just fink nah wot it would be costin' us if we 'ad to pay ninepence an hour for rowin' this boat—like on 'Ampstead 'Eath pond!"

It hurt Roscoe's mouth even to smile, while the calculation was too much for the little steward, and in time even he became numbed and unconscious at last.

It was on the twelfth—or perhaps the thirteenth—day that the sun was nearing the horizon in the west once more. The steeper swells were infused with a translucent green, as deep as the ocean itself, as the slow-moving mountains of water welled above the solitary boat before passing under her, and continued in their unimpeded course, silent like phantom ranks of cavalry, to crash with a booming roar on the distant coast that lay far below the eastern horizon.

Roscoe watched the sky darkening in the west as he

lay with his arm over the 'midship thwart, vaguely thankful that the heat of the day would soon give way to the cool of night, even if it became perishingly cold before dawn—if he was ever to endure another dawn. The nights were a little less intolerable than the blistering sun that gave them no peace, and there would soon be a little dew that they would lick and lick, each jealously guarding his own allotted area of thwarts and gunwale and frames and stern grating, a precious moisture that meant as much to them as life itself.

The faint breeze of the afternoon freshened slightly and already here and there the serrated top of a swell flashed suddenly white in the slanting rays of the sun, a pearl set in a sea of emerald. Quirk raised his head to catch the cooling breeze on his parched face as the boat rose to the top of a gently sloping hill of water. He gazed dully around the widened horizon, at the same expanse of majestically restless sea, and his eyes suddenly became fixed. The boat sank down the side of the passing swell and lay for a time in the calm of the trough, while he dragged his sore body to his knees and leant his chest on the gunwale, staring towards the west.

As the boat rose up the face of the next swell an inhuman strangled croak broke from his lips, and he clutched Roscoe's shoulder.

"Look, sir, blimey if it ain't—" But Roscoe was in a coma and neither Quirk's excitement nor his croaking voice, roused him. He could only stare dully at his companion's laborious movements as the little man tried to raise an oar and hold it aloft, pointing with talon-like fingers and gibbering foolishly.

And he only vaguely recollects, as in a half-remembered dream, looking up at the lean rakish cutwater of a comparatively small vessel as it appeared suddenly close to windward, and then at her low black sides passing slowly within a few feet, and a fountain of water that

sprang up between the ship's side and the boat as the two came together. He remembered dimly the sound of flogging canvas as the little vessel carried her way past them into the wind, and the black expanse of her counter as her stern rose almost above them. It must have been Quirk who grabbed the rope that landed with a crack across the boat, and he could remember shouted orders as they were hauled alongside the low hull.

He could still feel the dragging pain of his sores and the stiffness of his limbs as he was lifted over the high bulwarks, and an impression of a circle of faces, savage-looking and unkempt, and on the small poop deck the figure of a giant man with a heavy red beard, turning the spokes of the wheel and bawling in a deep voice: "Take 'em for'ard and get 'em well. Let draw yer forestaysail, you bastards. Heave in on the mainsheet!"

CHAPTER II

ROSCOE sat up painfully, surprised how weak he was. He had no idea how long he had been aboard this new vessel when he found himself awake, lying on a hard bunk in a narrow, dark little fo'c'sle, with the continuous roar of water close to his head outside the stout planking. The deck was at an angle, and an old coat, hanging on a peg against one of the cubby-hole bunks on the weather side, was swinging out and flapping against the rough table.

For some time he was conscious of a nauseating smell that seemed to pervade the ship, as though the bilge water—or the cargo, whatever it was—were putrid. While he tried to decide what it was, a shaft of light suddenly lit up the deck beams over his head and one of the crew came in. He was a broad-shouldered, big man with a small head and a neck showing three rolls of fat over the collar of his jersey. He was—or had been—clean shaven round his mouth, but at the sides of his face and below his chin he wore a fringe of straggly whiskers, like the ruffle of a Toby dog. There was a ring in the lobe of his left ear, but the lower part of the other ear was missing—a relic, he would have explained, of a passing love affair where the husband had been Spanish and a trifle narrow minded.

The great bulk of his body swayed instinctively on his short legs and balanced to the lurch and scend of the deck while he fixed protruding watery eyes on Roscoe, and grinned in a friendly manner, showing tobacco-stained teeth amongst which there had been many casualties.

"Cheerin' up, mate, ain't yer?" he said with a rumbling laugh that surged up from his stomach and resigned itself

to a loud belch. Roscoe dimly remembered that it was this man who had appeared with water—cool, heavenly water that he had gulped down and craved when they took the mug away again—and given him porridge and slush to eat. “You’ve been ravin’ like hell, you and your pal,” the man continued in a rumble, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “The skipper reckons you’ve laid there long enough. Got to turn out on deck.”

Roscoe shifted his position. Those boat sores on his back were still painful, and he pulled a wry face.

“How long have I been here?”

“We picked you up yesterday afternoon, mate. Lucky we did. You was pretty far gorn.”

As the fat man grinned his face wrinkled like an overripe russet apple, and he emitted a cackle that bore no relation to the deep rumble of his former laugh. Then he slumped down on to the bench at the table and began to cut up a plug of tobacco.

“What ship is this?” asked Roscoe after a while.

“*Black Arrow*, schooner, of Southampton, and I’m Ben Stave, bo’sun. Pleased to know yer.”

Roscoe started.

“We’re not bound home are we?” he demanded in a strained voice. Visions of being back in England after all when he had cut all ties from home flashed through his mind.

Ben Stave gave him a watery grin.

“ ‘Omesick already, are ye? Naw, we ain’t bound for home with *this cargo*.” His great frame shook at the thought, “we’re makin’ the Middle Passage as fast as we can,” he winked solemnly, “and the beggars are dyin’ on us, the bastards, as fast as *they* bloody well can. The Old Man wouldn’t a hove-to to pick you two lubbers up—and a nice little bit o’ handling that was, bringin’ the old ‘ooker alongside yer so we just ’ad to yank yer aboard,” he shook his knife solemnly at Roscoe, “if we hadn’t *lorst*

four of our men with the pox since we left Benguella. Got it off the nigger wenches, they did, and we're blinkin' short 'anded. You and your mate—skinny little devil 'e is, ain't 'e?—was a gift from 'eaven, and as soon as you're shipshape again, you turn to and 'elp work the ship. Skipper's orders, see?"

A horrible thought took root in Roscoe's mind, fed by the stench that pervaded the ship.

"What did you say the cargo was?" he asked.

"Blackbirds, o' course. Didn't you know this 'ere schooner's a slaver?"

Roscoe recoiled with dismay, staring at the old sailor. But the bo'sun put down the knife and spat unconcernedly on the deck.

"There ain't no faster schooner on this run than the *Black Arrow*," he went on. "We started this passage with three 'undred and sixty odd, packed up to the 'atches; but the bastards 'ave got the sickness, and forty or more 'ave gone overboard already." He hunched his immense body into a more comfortable position. "They'll do us pore honest sailors out of our rightful profit if they can, the devils, by adyin' on us out of spitel! Mind yer," he added, fumbling the tobacco chips into a blackened clay pipe with a ridiculously short stem, "the skipper don't treat 'm as bad as some blokes do on this passage. 'E feeds 'em, keeps 'em clean and lets 'em up for air when 'e can. 'Ark, They're gettin' some of 'em up now."

Ben held up a grimy finger, and Roscoe could hear a regular *thud, thud, thud* as of a drum beaten gently, and a sound of muffled shouting and moving from somewhere aft.

The position in which he now found himself was slowly becoming plain in all its horror. To be picked up by a slaver—the most loathsome craft that ever sailed the seas since the days of the floating slave hells of Rome and Carthage—to help to race her across the ocean, while her

living, writhing freight festered and stank and died, packed together like spoons in a drawer in the fetid air between decks, made him in the eyes of the law just another of her murderous crew subject to the penalty of justice if a British or American warship captured them in their illicit trade. Roscoe felt like a rat caught in a trap.

"Er course," Ben was saying, "the skipper's a gennelman; come from a good family, 'e did, but 'is family didn't feel too 'appy about 'im stayin' in England, so 'e starts in blackbirdin', and with a hooker as fast as this one—we've been reelin' off ten knots all this watch if we've been doin' one—'e can show 'is stern to all the frigates wot 'as tried to overtake us so far. Yes, Cap'n Hawke is a real tough bloke——"

"Cap'n 'Oo?"

They both looked up at the interruption and saw the puzzled face of Jeremiah Quirk, leaning out of one of the cubby-holes, his lips still swollen and set for asking the question.

"'Oo did yer siy the cap'n was, Ben?" he asked.

The bo'sun spat on the deck again.

"Cap'n Hawke, I said."

Quirk's eyes opened wide, and he gaped at Roscoe.

"Lumme, sir, we must 'ave shipped aboard anuvver bloomin' aviary! Cap'n Sparrow las' time, and nah Cap'n 'Awke!"

Then the little man's face disappeared while Ben let out a roar, slapping his thigh, and even Roscoe had to smile weakly. After repeating Quirk's remark a few more times and chuckling afresh, the bo'sun got up with a grunt and took a long drink out of a can of water.

"Yer better go on deck," he said wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "We'll be tryin' to dance some life into the bucks all the forenoon."

Roscoe suddenly realized how much he thirsted for a breath of clean, pure air, for the stench of the miserable

cargo was growing stronger and he suddenly began to retch. He climbed out of his bunk and staggered through the fo'c'sle door, his weak legs not yet used to the motion of the little schooner. On deck he leant against the rail to leeward, shading his eyes from the sun.

The *Black Arrow* he found was only a very small vessel, not much more than a hundred feet in length, and very narrow, with high bulwarks along her sides that reached to a man's waist, a small teak deck-companion aft, such as yachts have, leading down to the saloon, and a large hatch amidships which had evidently been added, for its rough construction was out of keeping with the smooth narrow deck-planks and teak rail. The two masts raked aft at such an acute angle that the head of the main top-mast, Roscoe judged, blinking up at the streamer stretched out from the truck and waving in great arcs against the blue sky, was over her stern, and she was carrying a single square topsail on the foretopmast, in addition to her fore-and-aft schooner's rig. There was a steady fresh breeze blowing on the port quarter, and with her scuppers gurgling, the rakish black schooner was driving her lean bow through the ocean at a great speed.

For a few minutes, until he became more used to the bright sunlight after the gloom of the fo'c'sle, Roscoe continued to lean against the rail. Fascinated, he watched the clean wave that curled incessantly from under the lee bow, a long, white, tumbling ridge of roaring water that spread out beyond the hull, dancing and sparkling in the sun, drawing a white streak across the blue face of the ocean. And past the schooner's low sides the water raced like a mad mill stream, rising and falling away as her graceful cutwater dipped and rose again before the seas.

There was something altogether satisfying and absorbing in the swift onward rush of this small sailing vessel before the ocean wind, a motion as near to the flight and swoop of a bird as anything that man had ever made. The

gradual lift of the stern as a great swell overtook her, the suddenly increased roaring under the cutwater as a long forward scend began and the crest of the sea came amidships and, passed along her sides forward to the bow, carrying her with it; and then the gradual sinking of her stern, the slowing down in the speed while the back of the swell rose up almost to her highly steeved jibboom and passed ahead, streaked with a lacework of froth; this was the embodiment of Flight, the essence of exhilarating speed and of the apparently effortless power that is felt aboard a beautiful sailing vessel when she is being driven before a fair ocean wind near her maximum speed.

So entranced was he by this thing of life, this hurrying, hurrying schooner after the laborious splashing of the paddle steamer, that Roscoe did not notice Jerry Quirk behind him until he heard the little man's plaintive voice.

"Blimey, sir, if that's the Old Man I reckon we're in for a nice quiet time—I *don't* fink!"

Roscoe turned his head and took in the scene on the after deck. Captain Hawke was standing against the weather poop rail, his feet planted well apart with one hand thrust into the pocket of his old jacket. He was wearing no cap and the bronze of his face showed darkly between the mass of windblown red hair that crowned his forehead and the great fierce bush that was his beard from which protruded the end of a cigar. Beside him one of the men, a tall, gaunt unshaven creature, held the spokes of the teak wheel in his hands, occasionally lifting his eye from the binnacle to glance aloft at the foretopsail, his whole attention held by the lovely thing he was steering.

The rhythmic thudding sound grew louder as another man, sitting in the lee of the break of the poop, continued to strike an upturned water-keg with a mallet, and one by one the black, naked forms of negroes dragged themselves painfully up through the main hatch. Roscoe saw that they were all joined by a long chain that was fastened

to iron collars round their necks, while their hands were manacled behind them, and another length of chain connected all their right ankles together, and clanked dismally as they appeared one after the other on deck.

With eyes downcast, or sullenly staring into vacancy, the negroes formed an uneven line along the deck, fifty or more of them, dejected, hollow eyed, caked with filth and excrement, tottering with the roll of the deck, their chains dragging necks and ankles as first one staggered and then another.

"Beat 'em up. Make the devils dance," the skipper's voice bellowed, and he waved a hand savagely at the reeling blacks. "Dance, you blackguards! Dance!"

The drum thudded louder than ever, quickening its tempo, the whites of their eyes began to roll beneath crinkly scalps, their feet began to shuffle uneasily, jerking the links of the chain on the deck. The mate's whip sang in the air, beating against black flesh with crackling suddenness, the clinking of the chains rose to a crescendo while the bare feet padded on deck and a rhythmic murmur broke from the staring faces of the dancers.

Captain Hawke clapped his hands imperiously.

"What the hell's the matter with the bastards this morning, Mr. Lane? Sing, you beggars; make 'em sing, Mister."

The drum beat even louder, the mate's whip whined and crackled, and a yelp of pain turned into an organized wailing that was echoed from two hundred throats from below. The sound, rising from the unbelievable bowels of the ship, rose and fell in a dirge of misery, the fear and dejection of a people stolen to serve an unknown fate. And as he listened to the crying of the slaves, coming up through the open hatch and blending with the thud of the tom-tom and the rhythmic clank of the chains, while the clean wind hummed in the rigging and the seas rushed by, Roscoe's flesh began to creep. There was a tone

of utter despair, of untold horror in that dreadful wail.

"You there. Come aft! Both of you!"

Roscoe turned sharply at the skipper's booming voice, and saw the man's eyes glaring at him. He made his way aft along the slope of the weather deck. Quirk following him, until they were standing beside the saloon companionway.

Captain Hawke looked them both up and down.

"Now you two. You're not just passengers aboard my ship," he said brusquely. "You'll both work your passages like the rest of the hands. You," he added pointing a bandaged finger at Quirk, "are you a seaman?"

"I'm a steward, sir," answered the little man in a slightly tremolo voice. "Steamship *Atalanta* of London, sir. She was lost——"

"I know that, you fool. We picked you up in one of her boats, didn't we? You go for'ard and lend a hand with the cook and help Mose serve the meals in the cabin."

With a backward glance at Roscoe, Quirk touched his forelock and shuffled thankfully forward. Then the skipper turned to Roscoe.

"You look a better class than that little rat. What were you?"

There was something in the big man's manner and the tone of his voice that showed the skipper was an educated man.

"I was just a passenger."

Captain Hawke eyed him a moment.

"It's rough being cast adrift in a boat like that," he chuckled, "and then being picked up by a—you know what this schooner is?—Unfortunate, isn't it?"

Roscoe shrugged his shoulders.

"Better than being left to drift about in that boat."

"Well I'm glad you appreciate it, Mr.——"

"My name's Torrence," answered Roscoe, "and I ought to thank you for picking me up."

Captain Hawke laughed, a deep rumble that shook beneath his chest.

"Oh we needed you. We lost some of our crew. What happened to the other passengers?"

Roscoe said he didn't know. He told Hawke briefly of the fire. The skipper nodded and glanced up at the fore-topmast truck.

"What the hell's your course?" he bellowed at the helmsman, and the startled man turned the spokes of the wheel with his eyes guiltily on the foretopsail. Roscoe noticed that the brass rim of the wheel, polished as a yacht's, bore the inscription BLACK ARROW, SOUTHAMPTON, 1849. Then the skipper turned to him and said:

"Bound for Brazil were you, Torrence? Starting a new life, eh? What were you before you left?"

"A doctor. I was going out to study tropical diseases."

"Oh, ho, *Doctor* Torrence, eh?" Captain Hawke's eyes twinkled with a whimsical expression. "Well, I reckon we can do with a doctor aboard this packet this trip," he added grimly. "We'll drink to that, Doctor, damme if we don't. Come below."

CHAPTER III

A TALL negro in white coat and trousers appeared as they entered the little saloon. The light from the skylight above glistened on his grey head and shone on the deep red panelling on the bulkheads.

Captain Hawke sat down at the head of the table and motioned Roscoe to a swivel chair beside him.

"Mose, bring a bottle of rum, and the Madeira."

"Yass, cap'n. De *ole* Madeira, sah?"

"The '36 you fool. This is an occasion." He turned to Roscoe. "You'd rather have Madeira at this time in the morning, I expect? I've got the taste for good old planter's rum myself since I've been out in the West Indies."

While the drinks were poured out the two men took stock of one another across the mahogany table.

"Like me, I gather you've finished with England for a time," said Captain Hawke. "Anything serious?"

Roscoe grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not exactly," he replied. "I'm a roving spirit by nature and got just about sick to death of the daily round of a G.P.'s life. Also," he added, after a pause, "I'd had a bad disappointment, and felt I wanted to go abroad for a time."

The skipper's eyes narrowed with an amused expression as he said: "A lady, eh?"

Roscoe nodded.

"You've got a beautiful little schooner here, Captain," he observed in a change of tone. "She looks like a yacht."

Captain Hawke's eyes shone with pride. "She is a

yacht, sir. Or perhaps I'd say she *was*. Dan Hatcher built her for a friend of my father's and when he died I bought her cheap from the executors. But I found I couldn't afford to run her just for pleasure as a yacht." He held up his glass to the light, shaking the thick amber fluid between finger and thumb, then swallowed it at a gulp. "I've always been a roving spirit and wanted to run away to sea when I was a kid." The big man chuckled reminiscently. "It was Squire Dorking that first started the idea of making a fortune out of the schooner, and he and Mr. Wallis—a sporting parson, by God, if ever there was one—offered the capital to turn this little ship into a blackbirder—the Squire reckoned on the profits, d'you see, and the parson—he's a distant relative of my mother—reckoned on saving the souls of the niggers." The skipper glanced up at the square of blue sky above the hatch and grinned. "This is our third trip, Doctor, and I'm damned if I see much profit in blackbirding—nor much soul saving either. Although I reckon they'll be better working on white folks' plantations than being at war with each other in Africa. But these stinking niggers die like flies, whatever we do to exercise the bastards and keep 'em healthy, and when we do get 'em ashore near Mobile the price they fetch will hardly pay for new light-weather canvas and a refit. And anyway they make my little ship stink."

Despite his innate repugnance of the whole business Roscoe could not help liking this big cheerful man. There was something almost refreshing about his nonchalance and honesty in talking of his foul trade in black flesh that went well with his cultured voice, and for the moment Roscoe began to feel that, after all, it was perhaps better for the negro to be taken from his squalid life in dark Africa and given food and clothing and a cabin to sleep in on some plantation in the West Indies or the Southern States.

"How long does this middle passage usually take?" he asked.

"With a schooner as fast as the *Black Arrow*", the skipper replied, his eyes lighting up with pride, "we can make it in six weeks from Benguella to the coast of Georgia or Alabama. If we get the winds. Last passage we lay in the Doldrums for three weeks with not a breath of wind to give us steerage way, and we lost nearly half our cargo. The first trip was better, but it took us eight weeks before we landed the blacks."

Roscoe was silent, occupied with a vision of the chained blacks stifling below decks, even with the hatches off, while the little schooner lay with her sails limp and the pitiless sun boiled the pitch in the deck seams.

"If we don't make more out of this trip", continued the skipper, "I'll have the slave quarters cleared and run on to New Orleans for a cargo. Ever been to New Orleans, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe shook his head.

"A fine old city with plenty doing there, and I reckon there are cargoes a-plenty to be picked up there bound for Nassau and the Gulf ports. If you care to sign on", the skipper added, "perhaps you'll see New Orleans, and perhaps you won't want to go on to Brazil by then."

"I've forgotten about studying tropical diseases in Parà already," laughed Roscoe. Then he looked straight at the skipper. "But what are the chances of being picked up by a man-o'-war? I thought this passage was pretty well patrolled nowadays?"

Captain Hawke continued to gaze at the amber light in his glass.

"With as fast a little ship as this," he said, pursing his lips, "very little chance. The *Black Arrow*'s a yacht, not an old trading schooner, and I reckon there's not a ship in the British Navy nor in the American to overhaul her. And the others don't give a damn about a little slaver."

"What about one of the steam frigates when we're in the Doldrums?"

Captain Hawke gave Roscoe a peculiar look.

"When you take up a trade like this you have to take the risks and not cry when you're caught. If we are cornered as badly as that there's only one remedy—never to be caught red-handed. You have to get rid of your evidence—even the irons and chains."

Roscoe stared at the skipper when the full significance of his meaning dawned on him. He had read somewhere, probably in the books and pamphlets against the horrors of the slave trade that had been so popular ten or fifteen years before, of ruthless blackbirders who, on being over-hauled, threw all their slaves overboard and removed all traces of them, so as not to be caught red-handed. He had imagined perhaps a Spanish or Portuguese captain resorting to such brutality, but to hear an English captain and a public schoolboy at that, referring to it in such a nonchalant manner took his breath away.

Captain Hawke apparently read his thoughts and his eyes twinkled above the rim of his glass. Then he burst out laughing.

"We've not had to heave them overboard yet," he said, biting off the end of a short fat cigar, "because we've not been chased by anything swifter than an old brig that wouldn't sail within six points of the wind. My God our navy ought to put a few faster ships in this part of the ocean if they want to catch a slaver! But you needn't look like that, Dr. Torrence; I reckon I'd take a sporting chance, even with another British dog-o'-war—provided she's slow enough—rather than tip a perfectly good and valuable cargo over the side. It's the Yankee ships that take a lot of shaking off. The Yankees always have built fast ships."

"But I don't look forward to being chased by a British warship," admitted Roscoe reluctantly, "even if the

Black Arrow can show a clean pair of heels. It's just the idea, I suppose—being like a hunted criminal."

Captain Hawke grinned.

"Why, I reckon that's what makes this slaving worth while. It's not the profits, it's the risks!"

He drained his glass and stood up, a fine broad figure of a man.

"I'd be glad if you'll mess with me, Doctor," he said in a friendly tone. "I'm glad to have the company of an educated man. The crew aboard here aren't exactly companions and I sometimes would like a man I can talk to. There's a spare berth aft too you can have, if you don't mind cramped quarters alongside the lazarette."

Roscoe thanked him, wondering at the sudden change in the skipper's manner; it was as though a streak of sentimentality had shown itself, a hint of the man's loneliness.

They went on deck into the clean tang of the following wind and found a score of blacks each side of the 'midship hatch jumping languidly while a tall grey-haired black beat time with his hands on a drum. At sight of the two rows of anguished humanity, at their miserable black faces and sullen eyes, Roscoe felt a sudden wave of pity; and his horror of what the *Black Arrow* and her skipper stood for, the abomination of this detestable trade in human misery came over him once more with all its previous dread.

Yet the skipper merely glanced at the negroes, shook his head and turned to the unshaven white man leaning against the bulwarks by the rigging.

"What's the matter with the blackguards this morning, Mr. Lane?" he asked, tossing the stub of his cigar away. "Can't you get any lift into this lot?"

"They're sulky. They need a taste of this, that's all," and the man called Lane held out a raw-hide whip.

"Well, hell Mister," bawled Captain Hawke in a rising

voice, "give 'em a taste. If they won't dance they'll skulk and die."

With a grin Mr. Lane ran the snaky hide through his fingers like a ribbon of pain, and at sight of it the blacks began to dance a little higher, a little faster. The *tom-tom* of the drum beat a little quicker.

Then like a flash the mate's arm shot out and the whip coiled about the shoulders of a big buck nigger at the end of the line. It made a noise like a match being struck, and a greyish line appeared suddenly across the black shoulders. The black's face distorted with shock, but not a sound escaped his lips. His row of dancers began to leap higher and higher, their chains clanking on the deck and jerking the necks of any out of step.

Then the whip recoiled, sang in the air and fell with another sharp crack across the faces of two of the niggers in the opposite line. They let out a howl of agony while blood began to run down the cheek of one of them and the other blacks in their line started to leap higher with renewed vigour.

"That'll do, Mister," said the skipper.

Roscoe turned away and gazed long at the still horizon with dismay in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

ACCUSTOMED as Roscoe had been to the primitive conditions of the London hospitals and the reek of the operating rooms and fever wards, it was as nothing compared to the stench and unbelievable staleness of the air in the slave hold. When Mr. Lane, the mate, told him that several of the negroes were prostrate with sickness—"they're either just plain skulking, Doctor, or else they've got the fever"—Roscoe had to force himself to descend into the hold and face the task of helping the sick.

Although the hatches were off it was gloomy below after the fierce sun glare on deck. While he stood for a moment at the foot of the companion ladder growing accustomed to the half light, he felt a host of eyes on him, malevolent eyes watching and waiting, like demons in a Dante's inferno, to spring upon him and tear him apart.

"Better mind your head, Doctor," Mr. Lane's voice reassured him, "the deck beams are a bit low."

Roscoe followed the mate along a plank walk with his head bent low, for neither could stand upright in the hold. As his eyes began to take in the details of the place and he could see the oak frames of the hull running down each side where the original saloon and cabins had evidently been ripped out, he could also see that the slaves were packed with diabolical economy of space for a voyage of anything from five to eight weeks. Round the sides of the hold the negroes lay like spoons in a drawer, the knees of each drawn up under the buttocks of the one ahead, their ankles chained together and their hands manacled before them. Down the centre on two long

benches between which there was only just room for him and the mate to pass, two lines of negroes sat astride, as close as it was possible to be, lolling against one another in every position of hopelessness and exhaustion. At the fore end of the hold some twenty or thirty women had been manacled and herded together in a mass of sweating black flesh. They lay in every conceivable position, the whites of their eyes following every movement the two intruders made.

"There's a couple of bucks here," said the mate, "look mighty poor." He caught a negro by the shoulder and turned him partly over. The man lifted his head, staring up in the half light with almost sightless eyes, while the two companions to whom he was chained on each side of him merely grunted.

The suffocating stench filled Roscoe's nostrils and made him retch as he bent down to examine the black. The man was lying in a state of utmost filth from which his companions had tried to escape as far as their chains had allowed. The man was sick indeed, feverish and exhausted, and Roscoe turned to the mate with an angry tone in his voice.

"How can you expect to keep them alive", he demanded, "in this filth? They ought to be exercised and their quarters washed out every day. Damn it, man, I can't do anything much for them in conditions like this."

"That's all right, Doctor, we get 'em up on deck and make 'em dance whenever the weather lets us."

"Why don't you have them all up on deck now that it's fine, Mr. Lane? It'd put life into the poor devils."

"Because we ain't a big enough crew to keep 'em under control, Doc. Most of 'em would jump overboard if they got a chance, and it takes us all our time to look after relays of fifty or sixty. They all get a turn on deck."

Roscoe turned away.

"I'll see what's in the ship's medicine chest," he said in

a resigned voice, "and try to mix up something to keep the fever down. But these quarters *must* be washed down and kept cleaner."

The mate grinned.

"They get sluiced down once a day, Doc, by one of the bucks, but you know niggers is pretty careless. And I shouldn't ask the skipper for supplies from the medicine chest if I was you. He reckons it's a waste of money trying to dose niggers. They either die on this passage, or they don't, that's all."

"To hell with that," exclaimed Roscoe, "I'm going to be in charge of medical supplies from now on. Now get that buck on deck and have the whole place thoroughly washed down."

And as he returned with infinite relief to the clean fresh air and blinding sunlight on deck, Mr. Lane glanced at his retreating figure with a shake of the head.

"If we did all he says," he thought, "we'd have 'em dying faster than ever. These niggers hate the sight of water."

For two weeks the blessed trade wind blew, and the *Black Arrow* made her westing across the Atlantic. Keeping a wary eye for the topsails of British or American cruisers on the lookout for slavers, she followed the course of her kind: that ocean route whose every mile held the secrets of abomination, of the misery of seasickness to a people that had not known the sea, of the straining at iron fetters that sank deeper into suppurating flesh, of the hot, fetid air that lay over the sweating negroes, of the horror of lying chained for days in the filth of closely packed bodies.

Slim, rakish and a joy to the discerning eye of a seaman, the small black schooner hid within her graceful hull such a hell of human misery that only the mind of a Dante could conceive, or the ingenuity of man make possible.

Like that other hell of the more primitive of the Christians, this schooner and her kind were the invention of man to satisfy a need, a need that had arisen through the subjection of men of one colour by men of another. It was hard to believe now that her designer had planned her, her builders in Southampton had built her, and her proud owner had once used her as a wealthy man's pleasure yacht, for pleasant summer cruises in the Solent and down Channel to the beautiful estuary of the Fal, to the coast of Brittany, and the Channel Islands. It was difficult to imagine her laid up each winter in the yard at Cowes, protected from the harmful east winds and cold rains by covers like the rich man's darling that she was. And when he sold his *Black Arrow* little did her former owner foresee what role his beloved schooner would fulfil south of the Line.

There were days when the wind was but a moderate, warm breeze, and Captain Hawke roared and thundered from his point of vantage on the poop while the crew went aloft and set the topsails, and two of the men climbed to the peak of the main gaff and out to the end of the long main boom and there lashed spars for a ringtail. There were nights when the wind blew steadily without a pause, a wind soft and caressing like new milk, and the schooner rolled under her press of white canvas, and her masts drew wide arcs against the starry sky and her long cut-water turned over a phosphorescent wave that spread fan-wise from her bows leaving in her wake a trail of writhing green phosphorescence as though she sailed the Milky Way.

Once or twice Roscoe offered to take his trick at the wheel, and during those two hours while he stood astride the deck and gripped the spokes with firm hands he realized an ambition that had always seemed impossible in the life of a general practitioner. His long-suppressed desire to sit under the stars, steering his own little vessel,

feeling her quiver with life and speed beneath his hands, while the ocean raced past in a hissing phosphorescent stream had now materialized.

There is something in a solitary trick at the helm during one of the night watches that engenders thoughts of adventure in a man. The clean wind, the rush of the sea past the hull, the wake hissing under the counter, the creak of spars and blocks, the very movements of the ship and her urgent swing and scend, combine to fire a man's blood, to put the world of civilization back into its proper place and to open up in his heart a realm of adventurous hopes.

While he watched a bright star disappear behind the peak of the foresail as the vessel rolled, and reappear a moment later, to hover like a pin point of light at the cross-trees, he fell to wondering what he would do were this little ship his own. Certainly it would not be to use her in her present horrible trade. He shuddered as he thought of the cargo of misery that lay and sweated beneath the open hatches while he stood and let the warm Trade wind ruffle his hair. The skipper had mentioned his own intention of giving up this slaving business when they landed this cargo, and turning the *Black Arrow* into an ordinary trading schooner. If he did that, Roscoe mused, and if the skipper would care to take him on, he felt tempted to stay with the ship and enjoy a few months' adventuring around the West Indies. Provided the schooner was turned into a peaceful trader and obliterated the stigma of her present role, he would have nothing to lose, and he did not feel like settling down again just yet. So much seemed to have happened since he had left England that now he felt ready for any further adventures. He felt that he had worked as a healer of human ills long enough; and now he stood, as it were, on the brink of freedom.

Roscoe began to feel exultant, welcoming the adventure and uncertainty that lay before him, ready to follow almost

any trail that promised a fuller, a fresher life. The days of hard work in a London hospital, the nights of hurried calls to a confinement, the heartbreaking life of a poor doctor amongst poorer people and the hopeless feeling of its futility, were all past now. He could breathe deeply and freely, knowing that he was a man again on the threshold of new hope.

But the subdued hubbub still arose from the slave hold, sometimes rising to mournful cries, sometimes deep and ominous like the muttering of a crowd angered, sometimes again a rhythmic wailing that told of packed bodies swaying to an age-old chant of despair, eyes rolling and hands clapping, until its very monotony drove the crew mad and the mate's voice would bawl out in the night—"For Chri' sake stop those bastards making that blasted row!" Then would sound the half-caste overseer's shouts and the sharp clap of his whip against cringing flesh. For a time all would be silent in the ship, and she would streak across the empty sea with only the whisper of the wind in the rigging and the gurgle of water at her bows to be heard, only the beauty of the night and the light of the stars shimmering on the wavelets to cloak the hell of despair that lay like death deep in her hold.

Captain Hawke would not allow any of his men to have black women in the fo'c'sle, but Roscoe knew that the mate took a crinkly-haired wench to his cabin at night, while most nights some of the watch below would steal down into the hold and go into the women's pen. Roscoe could sometimes hear the voices of the women. He could not tell whether they were cries of terror or of delight, but he could feel the rage of the chained black men rise up like a fiery spirit while they lay helpless and watched the white crew make sport of their womenfolk. Roscoe could not suppress a feeling of dread as he thought of their ravished bodies conceiving in chains half-caste children that would be born in chains, despised throughout

a life spent beneath the overseer's lash, and in the end to die in the chains of slavery. With so much beauty in the night, with his hands steering one of the loveliest creations of man, he felt sick at the thought of man's brutality that should make this thing possible.

Gradually the *Black Arrow* outsailed the Trades and ran into the Doldrums. The clean, hurrying wind was gone; in its place a blazing sun poured down on hot decks in whose seams the pitch oozed and bubbled. The sea lay like glass, shimmering in the sun, while dark patches moved slowly across its surface, little areas of ripples as though invisible wind sprites were blowing on its surface.

The mate watched the catspaws with surly eyes. When one came towards them, promising a little breeze, he would bawl his orders and send half the crew to the belaying pins.

"Tops'l braces! Ease off foresheets—overhaul your mainsheet! Slack away that for'ard guy."

And as the men worked and sweated in the heat, the breeze would never arrive; it would disperse before it reached the schooner, and the ripples would die and leave her rolling gently on a glassy sea. The mate would curse and the men return to the patch of shade under the fore-staysail.

Then another dark patch would approach from another quarter and Mr. Lane, watching its path across the water, would have the men running again.

"Starboard braces, look lively, you stiff-jointed bastards! Stand by the mainsheet for a gybe and cast off that guy. Jib sheets—slacken away y'r forestays'l sheets!"

And if the puff of wind reached the schooner her sails would fill in voluptuous curves and she would heel gently as the water began once more to chuckle under her cut-water. For a time she would come to life, and the silent grey shapes that had followed in her wake ever since she had left the coast of Benguella astern would no longer

lazily swim around her. But they would be there, not far astern, ready to dash and fight for the flesh that died in the hold.

Between the patches of wind, fickle as a woman's whim, that chased each other across the sea, the glassy calm would endure and the *Black Arrow* with her sails hanging limp while the foresail boom and gaff swung lazily from side to side, and the mainsail, the boom held from crashing to and fro by temporary lashings, gave a measure of air to those on deck by shaking a little draught down as it flapped lazily. The hatches were off the slave hold and the stench rose in the air, almost visible as a humid mist that hung over the deck, a sickening, choking, hellish fetidness in which lurked sickness and death.

The crew began to dread the slave quarters, and it was only at the skipper's bellowing command or the mate's orders that any of them would go to relieve the pent-up wretches, to give them their miserable food and stale water, and to put one or other of the more dependable bucks to the task of clearing away the accumulated filth. And day after day death came to release one and another of the slaves. Sometimes his touch was so stealthy the wretch lay dead, wedged between the live bodies of his companions, to drag hopelessly on their chains as they were ordered on deck for their enforced exercise. The calm sea, mirror-like beneath the cloudless sky, was disturbed and ruffled near the sides of the schooner, where the grey shadows formed and disappeared, flashed and turned beneath the surface in a cool underworld of sinister green, waiting, waiting. . . .

The blacks became more morose in their exercises on deck and even the lash failed to arouse more than a momentary sign of life in bodies that had become wasted and dejected. They would no longer sing, and Captain Hawke looked anxious as the mate tried in vain to get them to dance.

"I don't know what's up with the niggers this trip," he told Roscoe as they sat over lunch in the little saloon. "I've never had so many die on me before, and they're the sickest-looking lot I've ever shipped."

Roscoe looked straight at the skipper before replying.

"The trouble is due to the number you tried to carry, skipper."

"Oh, what the hell? Just as I was leaving the agent I deal with brought another lot down to the barracoons. Said they were from an up-country tribe and had been taken prisoner and were a fine lot, and could I take them? Well, I reckoned I could squeeze most of them in and so perhaps I did leave a bit fuller than usual. But, you know what those bucks'll fetch on the beach at Mobile?"

"There'd be more hope for them", Roscoe continued ignoring the question, "if they were exercised more and the hold washed cleaner twice a day. Once isn't enough."

Captain Hawke drained his glass.

"Did you ever hear what happened aboard the *Gracious Lady*?" he demanded suddenly.

Roscoe shook his head and peeled a plantain.

"She was a pretty little brig out of Savannah," the skipper went on. "Warren was a good skipper and he tried to combine business with kindness. He was running the middle passage a few years ago with about three hundred niggers aboard. The weather came fine and fair and he let half of them on deck for exercise. They broke loose and killed most of the crew. A few of the men barricaded themselves in the fo'c'sle. Poor old Warren and the mate locked themselves up in his cabin while the niggers let the rest of the blacks out of the hold. Some of them jumped overboard at once, but the others of course ranged about the ship, dancing and howling war songs. But they didn't know anything about ships, d'you see, and that night it began to blow a gale. The *Gracious Lady* had everything set and there wasn't anybody at the wheel.

She went over on to her beam ends when the first squall struck her and most of the niggers must have died of fright. Then she came up into the wind with her decks full to the rails and the wind took her all aback. The next thing the foremast came down and took the mainmast with it, and there she was, lying with both her masts over her stern and all the yards and sails and rigging crashing about the deck. Captain Warren told me he'd never seen such a mess. You see, when he felt her go down on her beam ends he guessed there'd be nobody at the wheel, and he reckoned to try to save his ship, niggers or no niggers. So he hurried on deck just as she rounded up into the wind and got taken aback. When the whole lot came down the niggers were so scared they just lay about the deck amongst the wreckage and howled for mercy. It took Captain Warren and those of the crew that hadn't been killed—about a dozen of them—the best part of a week to clear the mess and jury rig her, and they sailed her in to the coast near Savannah without losing another nigger. Those bucks had had their fill of freedom and were like sheep the rest of that passage." Captain Hawke gave a wry smile. "But old Warren kept them all in chains after that—he'd learned his lesson about being too kind. And I don't intend to be caught the same way."

After twelve days of baffling catspaws and slatting canvas, constant pully-hauly work by the disgruntled crew, and suffocating heat, the *Black Arrow* dragged herself clear of the Doldrums and sang once more throughout her fabric with the ecstasy of speed. Captain Hawke ceased to bawl at the men if he caught them being sluggish in handling the sheets and braces, and the men themselves put fresh life into their work and became the cheerful noisy crowd on the foredeck that they had been before the Doldrums.

Nothing so much as a continued calm tries the tempers

of men in sailing ships. And with the clean wind sweeping across the ocean, speckling the deep blue with touches of white, and singing in the rigging, Roscoe felt life quicken in the very deck-planks, and at his voluntary trick at the wheel he exulted in the sensitiveness of this lovely little schooner. So immediate was her response to the touch of the wheel, so different her hurrying movements to those of the *Atalanta* with her thudding paddlewheels, that he almost wished the passage would last another month or more. For the first time in a humdrum, busy life he had begun to feel free to do what he liked, to enjoy the sense of just being alive and full of vitality.

But still the pent-up misery below decks remained to trouble him night and day. Three more negroes, one of them a woman far gone in pregnancy, had been carried up on deck and dropped unceremoniously overboard. They had died, he knew, from sheer dejection: nothing could have saved them, for all desire, all will to live, had gone. But it was almost impossible for him to examine them all every day and find out which ones were really ill and which were merely feigning sickness so as to be spared the daily exercise on deck. Their bodies were so tightly packed and, despite his orders, so covered with filth, and it was so dark in the corners of the hold even with the hatch covers off, that he could only hope to attend to a fraction of the poor wretches. And what a task it was down in that putrid, sweltering atmosphere, with the deck-beams so low that he could not stand upright, and the stench from the packed bodies indescribable. So long as the weather remained fine and the seas did not come aboard they could keep the hatches open and the air in the slave quarters was just breathable; but he shuddered to think what it would be like if they should run into bad weather that lasted a day or two with the hatches battened down. Nobody but a savage black man could endure such an atmosphere and come up on deck again alive.

They were passing to the northward of Cuba keeping even the peaks of the island below the horizon, for fear of being detected by unwelcome cruisers. Yet with the wind come away from the south the negroes began to smell the land and their restlessness grew every hour. They had begun their wailing again, clapping their hands in unison, and clanking their chains on the benches, while they lifted their voices in a mournful dirge that rose weird and appealing through the open hatchways. Even Roscoe could smell the scents of the land now, the soft warm smell of the earth and flowers and rain and dust. But they kept their course north-west by north, heading for the last leg up the Gulf to a stretch of beach along the Alabama shore where the skipper knew a lonely anchorage where traders would take over his cargo. Even the crew were restless and expectant now, for within a week they hoped to be on shore again with money to burn.

CHAPTER V

MR. LANE came to Roscoe in the afternoon with a grim look on his face.

"You'd better come and have a look at some of those damned niggers, Doc," he said. "There's a bunch of them look dead or mighty sick for'ard on the starboard side."

Roscoe steeled himself against the stench below and descended into the hold. As he picked his way past the rows of black bodies, struggling against the desire to retch and turn back, he could feel the hatred that lay behind the hundreds of staring eyes and he was glad now that these half human beings were chained together.

One of the crew led the way with a lantern to the darkest part of the hold. He stopped at the far end by the bulkhead and threw the rays of the lantern on the huddled forms lying in a corner. Roscoe bent to examine the blacks, taking the lantern from the seaman's hand.

At least three of the negroes were dead, the two others each side of them moved a little as though death were already in their hearts. But what he saw caused him nearly to drop the lantern. The very stench, the vomit, and the indescribable filth told him of the horror that was now added to the ship. Fear suddenly clutched at him and he escaped up the companion ladder with the seaman following.

"Have those three blacks sent overboard," he ordered the man, "but remember—get ropes around them and don't let any man *touch* them. And have the hold washed down."

As he steadied himself a moment against the main fife

rail there was sudden activity on deck and he heard the skipper's voice shouting.

"Leggo tops'l sheets, and furl! Main topping-lifts. Stow your mainsail! Leggo jib sheets. Jib halyards! Furl your jib. *All hands!*" Captain Hawke pushed the helmsman away from the wheel, sent him forward and stood, feet braced apart, holding the spokes in steady hands. "In haul your jib, Mister", he bellowed, "and pass gaskets around the bunt."

The second mate called "aye aye, sir" from the fo'c'sle head and the jib bowed to leeward, flogged once and then folded into the arms of two of the crew.

Almost instinctively Roscoe looked to windward and saw the cause of the excitement. A black cloud, sharply defined against the grey sky, was rushing towards them out of the south-west, whipping the sea into a smother of white as it came. It was a real Gulf squall, and Roscoe could see that it would strike the schooner within the next few minutes. Knowing their danger, the hands were shortening sail as fast as they knew how.

"Mr. Lane!" roared the skipper once more, "batten down the hatches. Double lash 'em!"

Roscoe turned and ran aft to the skipper.

"For God's sake don't close the hatches yet," he cried, "there're three negroes——" Before he could finish the sentence Captain Hawke, with his eyes on the foretop let out a roar.

"What in thunder are you doing with that tops'l? Get those gaskets around it!" He cupped his hands. "D'you want to wipe your blasted noses with it? Furl it—damn you—*furl it!*" His eyes travelled down the foremast. "You for'ard there! Clear that jib halyard and belay! Mr. Lane, look alive with those hatch covers——"

The first puff caught the schooner and Roscoe felt her heel beneath him. The wind wailed in the rigging and the blocks and sheets creaked. Captain Hawke braced himself

against the wheel and held her to it, his eyes aloft on the foretopsail. Two of the men were still struggling to subdue the bunt of the sail as it flogged in the wind, shaking the mast like a whip.

"Captain Hawke," said Roscoe urgently, "we can't have the slave hatch closed just yet. There're three negroes dead and, God knows——"

"Hell, Doctor," the skipper laughed, apparently noticing him for the first time, "this is going to be a snorter. She'll be down to the skylights in five minutes."

"But if we don't get those niggers overboard——"

"Blast the niggers," roared the skipper, and the wind whipped the words out of his mouth. "Let 'em wait. D'you think I'm going to lose my ship for a couple of dead bucks? Hey, Mr. Lane! Are the hatches made fast?"

"Aye aye, sir," came the mate's reply, faintly on the wind, "all fast now, sir."

Roscoe bit his lip and stared gloomily at the closed hatches. Before he had time to think of the horror that crept beneath them the wind rose to a scream in the rigging and the *Black Arrow* heeled over until her starboard rail lay buried beneath a torrent of boiling water. Spray, whipped off the crest of a sea, came over the weather rail and stung his face like hail. He dropped to the deck and held on to a cleat in the shelter of the weather bulwarks.

Behind him Captain Hawke stood on the sloping deck, his feet braced apart, the knuckles of his great hands showing white as he gripped the spokes of the wheel. There was a look of pride and achievement in his blue eyes, a look almost of affection that Roscoe had never seen before. With the squall screaming across the sea, holding the little schooner down even under her reduced canvas of foresail and forestaysail only, the skipper seemed to have become one with his ship, coaxing her lovingly, easing her through the rapidly mounting seas, treating her like a faithful but frightened horse.

With a report like a cannon and a crackle of musketry, the topsail broke from its lashings, flogged just once and burst. The foretopmast shook like a whip and fragments of canvas streamed for a moment from the yard, and in an instant were gone—blown to leeward on the wings of the gale.

Captain Hawke swore.

"Those bastards couldn't furl a tablecloth," he growled to himself, "and that was a new tops'l this voyage. Aloft and make fast," he bawled, but his words were lost in the gale.

For two hours the schooner lay over and raced through the seas. Every so often a crest would strike her weather bow with a sound like thunder and burst into a cascade of spray that clattered into the foresail and streamed across the sloping deck. The wake roared past the lee scuppers and rose in a hissing mound under her slim quarter, to fall away into a trail of white tracery work that lost itself in the welter astern. There was no break in the leaden sky and soon the sudden darkness of the tropics would be upon them. The squall had generated into a blow that might last all night, and while the skipper stood at the wheel, oblivious of anything but the masterful handling of his ship Roscoe sat on the deck under the lee of the weather bulwarks, drenched with spray and exulting in the power and grandeur of the conflict, yet dreading what the morrow might reveal.

For the first time Captain Hawke appeared to notice Roscoe and nodded towards him.

"We ought to be hove-to in this," he called out, and the words seemed to be carried away on the wind like fleeting thoughts, "it's punishing the little lady." His hands instinctively eased the spokes a half turn as the schooner's head rose to a sea. "This one'll wash the decks," he said exultantly. "Keep a hand ready."

As he spoke the schooner's bow fell from under her,

down, down, until her long jibboom buried itself into the face of the grey monster that swept down upon her. For a moment she seemed to hover with the white crest rushing to overwhelm her. The sea broke with a sharp roar and Roscoe felt the deck shudder beneath him. While the staunch little vessel began to lift her head again, quivering from end to end, he leapt for the rail and hung on as a wall of water swept aft along the deck, surging over the hatches, swilling around the mainmast and pouring through the scuppers.

Under the weight of water the *Black Arrow* seemed to reel like a man who has received a heavy blow, and for a moment it looked as though she would not rise to the next comber. Roscoe glanced at the skipper's face and saw an expression of admiration that almost transformed the man. He looked like a proud father watching a son winning a boxing match. The light of exultation was in his eyes and his face looked kinder, more human than Roscoe had yet known it.

The schooner shook herself free of the water, heeled over until the sea welled up through the lee scuppers, and raced ahead once more into the gathering gloom.

One of the crew hurried aft and the skipper handed over the wheel.

"Keep her full-and-bye," he said, "and ease her into it."

Roscoe followed him across the steeply sloping deck and down the companion steps like a drunken man. Sailing at this angle with frantic plunges into the troughs of the sea, the schooner's motion was like a bucking horse, and it was all he could do to keep on his feet until he sank into a chair in the little saloon. The skipper rapped the table and as Jerry Quirk appeared, his slight figure balanced at a grotesque angle in the doorway, he ordered the rum and two glasses.

"Rum's the stuff to put life into you in weather like

this, Doctor," he said as he shook off his streaming coat. "It's going to be a dirty night. The Gulf has a mighty bad reputation for a blow in this quarter, and by rights I ought to have hove-to an hour ago, but", he settled into the chair and rested his arms on the table, "it just allows us to lay our course, and at this rate we ought to close in to the coast east of Mobile by noon to-morrow. I'm sick of the passage this time. It's not been a good trip—there've been too many of the niggers dying."

Roscoe gave the skipper a searching look.

"I don't think there'll be many alive to-morrow," he said significantly, "if we can't give them air."

"How the hell d'you think we can have the hatch covers off now?" demanded the skipper. "It's beginning to ease off, but listen to that now."

As he spoke Roscoe heard the dull rumble of a sea tumbling on deck and the wash of water over their heads. A small cascade of drips spurted through the closed skylight above them and fell slanting into the corner of the saloon.

"But my God, captain, we can't keep those poor devils bottled up down there all night."

"It won't hurt 'em. They're used to a bit of thick air." The skipper laughed grimly. "They like it."

"It's not that." Roscoe's strained voice made the skipper look at him. "My God, it's not just that. *It's Yellow Jack!*"

The colour left Captain Hawke's face.

"Yellow Jack? My God, why didn't you tell me?"

"There wasn't a chance. I went down before this gale sprang up," Roscoe hurried on, the words tumbling from his lips, "there're three of them dead and now heaven knows how many will be down."

"Christ Almighty!" whispered the skipper, his throat dry. His hand trembled as he lifted his glass of rum and he swallowed the contents at a gulp. There was a tense

silence in the little saloon while Roscoe sat with a grim look on his face, and the skipper crushed the glass in his hand and stared unseeing at the trickle of blood that began to drip through his fingers on to the table.

"My God, Torrence," he exclaimed at last in a low voice, "we must get rid of the blackguards that've got it. What about the ones you said have already died?"

"They're still down there."

"Still *down* there—?"

"I was having them brought up and put overboard," Roscoe replied in a dull voice, "but you had the hatches battened down. They're still there."

The skipper leant forward, his eyes glaring at Roscoe.

"Are you *sure* about it?" he demanded.

"There's no mistaking Yellow Jack once you've seen it."

Captain Hawke thumped the table with his fist and stood up.

"I'm going along to make sure," he said. "You come along too."

The skipper led the way through the forward saloon door into a short passageway. He called Quirk and the little steward brought him a lantern. Then he unbolted a heavy door at the end of the passage and Roscoe recoiled for a moment as they passed into the slave hold. The stench and the unbelievable thickness of the air made it impossible to breathe except in short retching gasps, while the surge of bilge water beneath the sloping floor mingled with the frightened moans of the imprisoned wretches. It was all the skipper and Roscoe could do to keep their feet on the heeling plankway, and Roscoe shuddered to think of what would happen if they did slip down amongst the huddled forms leeward, amongst those eyes whose terror and hatred gleamed in the light of the swinging lantern.

They found the stricken group, the living manacled to

the putrefying dead, and the skipper recoiled from what he saw. He reached down and tried to turn one buck over, while Roscoe instinctively caught his arm.

"For God's sake don't touch them," he cried. "We can't do anything till we can heave them overboard."

At the sound of his voice the slaves set up a crying that came from all sides, a wailing that rose with anger and dread that made Roscoe's flesh creep. With a shudder the two men picked their way back to the passage door, followed by the howls and curses of the negroes. The skipper bolted the door, shutting out the sound, and leant against the bulkhead gasping in the pure air.

"Great God, Torrence," he exclaimed at last, "you're right. It's Yellow Jack. To think this should happen aboard *my* ship. God have mercy on us!"

He slumped into a chair in the saloon and gulped down a tumbler of rum. Roscoe took the bottle and was thankful to do the same.

"Torrence," said the skipper at last, the glass trembling in his hand, "we can't open up those hatches until daylight."

"But, great heavens," Roscoe exclaimed, "every one of them'll die if we don't. If we only get those bodies overboard now we can—"

"If I could save this cargo", said the skipper, "I'd take any risks, but not with plague." He shook his head. "You heard about the schooner *Faithful*? She was running a cargo of blacks—nearly three hundred she had—to Cuba. It was back in '43 or '44, and the slaves got Yellow Jack. They battened down and sailed her in towards the coast, and when they opened up there wasn't a negro left alive. The crew had to abandon the ship, and," he hesitated, glancing around at the panelled bulkheads and the deck-beams of the saloon, "God knows that's just what we may have to do."

Roscoe stared at the man, his jaw working.

"We can't do *that*," he exclaimed, angrily. "I'll do what I can to stop the thing spreading. Some of the crew'll have to wash down the slave hold, and we'll separate any that show any signs——"

"You won't get any man in the crew to go down there," was the skipper's grim reply, "if they get wind of Yellow Jack. And we can't get those hatch covers off while the seas run as high as this."

Captain Hawke looked hopelessly around the saloon.

"What blasted luck to have to lose a valuable cargo like this."

Roscoe was speechless as he stared at the man.

The night wore on, one weary hour dragging after another while the seas tumbled every so often on the deck above their heads. At last the skylight appeared as a rectangle of grey above the table. The schooner was not plunging as deeply now and as he staggered up the companionway Roscoe could hear the foresail boom slamming back and forth as the ship rolled. In the keen air on deck as the little vessel rose on a swell he saw the sun's tip above the horizon, like gleaming copper, then a comber rose, grey and ominous, with its serrated crest above the rail.

But the wind was dying as though swallowed up by the coming day, and although the schooner was tumbling about in the swell left by the night's gale, no heavy water was coming aboard. The crew had set the mainsail again and Roscoe could see three of them swiveling up the jib halyards, hauling with feet against the rail while a fourth belayed on the fife rail. But they were strangely quiet. Their usual shouts and bursts of horse play were absent, and Roscoe watched them with growing alarm.

"Get those hatch covers off," bawled the skipper's voice, and one or two men came forward, but hesitated. Then they went back and joined their mates.

"What the hell're you waiting for, you blackguards?" the skipper shouted from the after deck. "Come aft and get those covers off."

But the men did not move.

"What's the matter with them this morning?" the skipper demanded of the mate.

Mr. Lane looked significantly at him.

"They've heard the niggers've got Yellow Jack, sir," he said.

Beads of perspiration stood out on the skipper's brow and his mouth began to work.

"Yellow Jack be blistered. Who the hell said that? You get those men working, Mr. Lane, and give the black devils some air or by God I'll—"

The skipper's knees suddenly gave way and he pitched forward to the deck. The mate gave him one horrified glance and edged away. With eyes dilated the helmsman dropped the wheel spokes as though they too were plague-ridden and croaked:

"Plague!" Then he staggered past Roscoe to where his mates stood grouped together by the foremast, silent and wary.

Roscoe hurried to the skipper and felt his burning neck. Then he put his hands under his arms. But he was a big man and too heavy to lift.

"Lend me a hand some one," he called out.

But not a man moved.

"You—one of you—help me get him below."

He stood up and faced the crew. The group seemed to retreat under his angry stare. Even the mate was standing back, a look of horror on his face.

Roscoe waved an arm in their faces.

"Damn you—you—and you. Won't one of you lend a hand—you white-livered cowards. Don't cringe there like a lot of blasted curs. Come aft here and help me get him below."

But not a man moved forward. Slowly the group held

together and backed along the deck, their faces blank with fright. Then with a growl of disgust Roscoe gathered his strength and, lifting the limp form of the skipper on to his shoulders, he staggered below.

"Quirk," he called, "bring a basin of cold water and some linen."

For two hours or more he sat by the skipper's bunk bathing the heated brow and feverish hands, while the big man tossed and moaned in delirium and the steward, mastering his awe-stricken expression, brought more water and cloths. For two hours or more he fought the dread fever with the poor supplies at hand, washing and bathing the troubled flesh, keeping death at bay.

There seemed to be an uncanny silence in the ship, and from where he sat Roscoe could hear only the creaking of blocks and the occasional shaking of one of the sails. In the excitement he had forgotten the slaves, and he suddenly wondered why they were so silent. The sun was well up now, streaming through the skylight, and the cabin clock pointed almost to noon.

"Keep on bathing his face and neck like this," he said, and went on deck, leaving the steward to attend to the skipper.

The sea had gone down to a moderate swell on which the schooner rose and fell with a sluggish motion. She lay with her jib aback in the light breeze and with no one at the wheel while the fierce rays of the sun scorched her deck. Roscoe looked around for the crew, but the deck was deserted and with a start he saw that the slave hatches had not been touched: they were still battened down.

Then he noticed that the longboat had gone from its skids, and he ran to the rail. Half a mile away he saw it, the oars flashing in the sunlight, the faces of the crew watching the schooner.

"The blasted swine," he exclaimed, bringing his fist down on the teak rail.

Savagely his hands tore at the corners of the hatches, but he could not move them. What suffocating hell was hidden beneath the heavy covers surpassed his imagination.

He hurried to the companionway.

"Quirk, come on deck and give me a hand with the hatches. Those bastards have deserted ship and left the slaves to suffocate."

The steward ran up the steps with a startled expression on his face.

"Blimey, sir," he exclaimed, "it's a good job they've left us the other boat," and he jerked a thumb towards the little ship's boat that still lay in its skids.

"Never mind that," growled Roscoe, ignoring the man's meaning, "help me get the hatches off."

Between them they lifted off the heavy hatch covers, one after another and looked down into the slave hold. A thin vapour seemed to rise out of its depths and what he saw there drove Roscoe back to the rail his face drawn with horror.

"It's no good, Quirk," he said at last. "There's not a soul alive down there now."

Without a word he cast off the jib sheets from the cleat and walked aft to the wheel. The schooner's head slowly paid off as he turned the spokes until the sails had ceased to shake and became still. Slowly she gathered way and her slim hull began to trickle through the water once more.

"Go on bathing the captain's face," he said dully.

Quirk touched his forelock.

"Yes sir. Excuse me, sir. But, shall we be sighting land before long, sir?"

Roscoe looked at the little man as though he did not see him for some time. Then he nodded slowly.

"We'll pick it up sooner or later on this course, Quirk. It's not so far."

"Yes sir, and then, sir?"

Roscoe hesitated. The real horror of the situation, of being found in charge of a plague-infested schooner with a cargo of death, came home to him.

"There's nothing for it, Quirk," he said in a low voice. "We'll have to set fire to the ship when we sight the land, and get ashore in the boat there."

Quirk stopped at the companion.

"But, excuse me, sir, what abaht the capt'in?"

"We'll not desert him," Roscoe answered, "he'll come with us—if he gets over the fever."

CHAPTER VI

LIFE at times is like a road with many twistings and many crossroads. The traveller plods onward until his footsteps lead him to a dividing of the ways and there pauses uncertain whether to turn to the left or the right. If the stars are in his favour he makes his decision and never looks back; but if fate has forsaken him his choice is always the wrong one and failure and regret lie waiting for him at the next bend in his way. No one can tell him which road to take, none may advise which leads to success, which to misfortune: he may pray for guidance as he stands at the crossways, but the heavens are blank; he may curse his luck, but the fates are silent. Along this road of life the traveller makes his way for good or ill, stumbling in blindness, buoyed by faith or racked by despair.

Thus did Roscoe find himself at the crossways soon after he had arrived in New Orleans, half his life behind him, half waiting for him to choose his course. For the time being he had installed himself at the Palmetto Hotel, waiting for the mail from London with a draft from his bank. Until that arrived he could not pay his passage to Brazil. Contrary to his usual impatient nature he did not mind waiting. No ship was due to sail for three or four weeks in any case, and in that time the spell of New Orleans was getting into his blood. As the weeks went by the desire to go to the swamps of the Amazon became less and less insistent. The hotel was cool, comfortable and relaxing. It was one of those residential places where several families with their own coloured servants appeared to be permanently installed, where the verandahs were

cool and shady with ivy, and there was no lack of interesting society in the public rooms.

Truth to tell, his experiences at sea had engraved a deeper scar on his character than he at first realized. After the shock of the *Atalanta* burning and those terrible days in the gig with Jerry Quirk, what he had witnessed aboard the *Black Arrow* had left a feeling of loathing and horror in his soul that had driven out for the time being any desire to face the heat and fevers of the Brazilian swamps for the benefit of mankind. Roscoe had seen enough of the horrors of slavery to turn him into a real abolitionist.

The first week in the hotel was an unhappy experience for him, for the place and the streets seemed to swarm with coloured people, and in each of them he could only see a negro whose life of miserable servitude had begun in the stinking hold of a slave ship like the *Black Arrow*. At times he even wished his professional conscience had not enabled him to save Captain Hawke from the ravages of the fever and allowed him to depart for the West Indies full of thanks with Jerry Quirk as his adopted servant. Roscoe almost wished he had left the genial ruffian to die with the human cargo aboard the schooner instead of landing him on that swampy coast after setting the schooner on fire. It was only Hawke's assurance that never again would he touch the foul trade of blackbirding that had made Roscoe attend the skipper until the fever was gone.

For a week Roscoe's heart bled for every coloured man or woman he saw on the streets or in the hotel. At first he could scarcely trust himself to speak with civility to any of the white people, whose apparent familiarity with their black servants and easy acceptance of these poor slaves appeared to him a proof of their barbaric indifference to their wrongs. His imagination, fired with the recent scenes on the *Black Arrow*'s decks, pictured these

Southerners as callous taskmasters beneath whose lash the cringing negroes sweated and bled. But the pert Mulatto chambermaid and the impish faces of the black bell boys, the waiters, the hall servants and the chattering, laughing swarms of black crinkly headed small fry that gambolled around the porch steps, under the tables and at times even into his own bedroom, were a trial to his abolitionist views. Observe closely as he might he could find no sign of misery amongst the hotel's coloured staff, and in the streets of the old French Quarter where more blacks than white folks trod the sidewalks or lounged against the ramshackle houses there appeared to be no sign of unhappiness. They seemed to be just a crowd of happy-go-lucky, soft-voiced, hilarious and untroubled children whose wrongs if any at the hands of their white masters had been completely forgotten.

On the verandah of the hotel one evening Roscoe found all the chairs except one occupied by gentlemen in their favourite attitude with boots resting on the verandah rail and chairs tilted back. Seen from the street the hotel would have revealed no faces beneath the delicate wrought ironwork that graced its façade: passers-by on looking up would see only a row of boots along the rail, the owners hidden behind them.

Roscoe settled in the vacant chair and crossed his legs while the coloured boy brought him his drink.

"Here, Sambo," Roscoe called after him, "this is corn whisky you've brought me. I asked for Scotch with a dash of soda."

The man next Roscoe put down his newspaper and turned a clean-shaven face in his direction.

"You won't have much luck getting Scotch here, sir," he said, "they don't appreciate it as we do at home. It's mostly rye they drink here."

"So I've noticed," said Roscoe smiling, "but I haven't got a taste for the corn brew just yet, and I happen to

have a distinct taste for a good glass of Scotch this evening. Even though", he added wiping his forehead, "it's perhaps a more suitable drink for the English climate than for this heat. You know England, sir?"

His acquaintance smiled. He was a square-jawed man of perhaps forty with unusually large ears and humorous, dark blue eyes.

"I was born there, in Bedford," he said, "and only came out here ten years ago. My name's Warner, David Warner, and I'm a shipping broker on Canal Street. You'll see my office in the block next the Corn Exchange."

Roscoe introduced himself and the conversation grew.

They talked of English winters, *The Times*, the unpunctuality of the Chatham and Dover trains and what the girl of the period was coming to. Mr. Warner mentioned that he had been over to the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park and that led to talk of London, the Gaiety, Piccadilly and the Strand, while around them was a buzz of conversation as the other men in the row rustled their newspapers, clinked the ice in tall glasses, shifted their feet, and spat with uncanny regularity into the polished cuspidors.

"Do you find business good here?" asked Roscoe during a lull as he succumbed to local tradition and put his own feet up to cool.

"I've nothing to complain of," said Warner. "The cotton crop's been good this year—the last shipload for Liverpool goes to-morrow—and freights look good for some time to come."

"New Orleans must ship a lot of freight in and out," Roscoe suggested fingering his glass.

"Yes indeed, it's a pretty big port, you know," agreed Warner, "and the Mississippi brings us freight from half the United States. Nearly all the cotton and corn and sugar comes down that way."

"The river steamboat companies must do pretty well, then."

"Well, some do and others don't. Depends on how they're run. The Express Line, for instance, that runs those big boats up to St. Louis, the *Cincinnati*, the *Wabash Chief* and so on, must be making a lot of money. Those boats are like floating palaces. Have you travelled on one?"

"No," said Roscoe thoughtfully, "not yet."

"Well, then, you take a concern like the Louisiana Packet Company with three or four small boats running up the Red River, they're not more than paying their way. Slow boats, poor service and no refinements don't get 'em either the freights or the passengers. You've got to run your boat well and give the passengers every luxury, then if your boats are fast and become popular like the Anchor fleet, you do a fine business. And", Warner added looking into his glass, "so do I when times are good."

Roscoe was silent for a while.

"Is it possible to run only one steamboat," he asked, "and make her pay?"

"Well, yes, if you are a smart captain," said Warner, "and know how to get freight and not waste time tied up off levees. There's the *Creole* for instance. She's a one-boat concern. And there's the *Magnolia Bloom* that old Cap'n Hickey runs by himself. They keep going without any actual loss, but it must be difficult with the competition of the bigger companies and combines."

Warner glanced across at Roscoe.

"Are you interested in any of these steamboat lines, Dr. Torrence? They can be a pretty good speculation, you know."

Roscoe shook his head, turning his glass around until the ice clinked against the sides.

"I dare say they can," he said slowly. "I was just thinking that one would get a great deal of fun out of running

one or two of those boats. There's something about the Mississippi that fascinates me and always has done ever since I heard about it from an uncle that came out here in '39 or '40. Although Dickens didn't seem to think much of it. Have you read his *American Notes*, Mr. Warner?"

"No, I can't say I have," Warner admitted. "I don't go in much for reading. Yes, sir, the Mississippi is a wonderful river, and well worth seeing all the way up to the Ohio. You ought to make the trip Dr. Torrence. I dare say I could fix you a return fare at special rates aboard one of the Express Packet boats."

Roscoe nodded.

"Thanks, Mr. Warner, I'll think it over."

"Oh there's no hurry. If you decide to take a trip I'd be glad to fix it for you. Here's my card."

"Well, I'd be very pleased to come along and see you if I decide to go."

As he spoke a phaeton drove past the hotel behind two handsome black horses whose sleek coats shone in the sunshine. A coal-black negro in dark blue coachman's livery sat holding the reins. In the shade of their laced parasols two exquisitely pretty girls were sitting in the carriage, their merry eyes peeping out from beneath flowered bonnets, while behind them a diminutive black page, also in dark blue livery, rivalled the coachman for gravity and importance. Passers-by on the street paused and gazed after the young ladies, and half a dozen ragged nigger boys scampered after the carriage whooping and chattering.

"Know who they are?" asked Warner crossing his legs.
Roscoe shook his head.

"They're the Devereux sisters," explained his acquaintance. "Two of this season's belles. General Devereux owns one of the biggest sugar plantations up the river. They're a noted family and enormously rich."

"They both look very charming young ladies," Roscoe observed somewhat absentmindedly.

Warner glanced at him with a smile.

"So they are," he said lowering his voice. "Louisa, the elder of the two, has already been the cause of two young bloods getting killed in duels—there was quite a mild scandal when young Dangerfield shot his brother on account of her charms—while little Annette there has at least a hundred young fellows tailing after her, although she only came out this season."

"They still fight duels here, then?" Roscoe asked.

"Oh yes, but they're more discreet about it than they used to be. It's illegal now, but that doesn't stop these fiery young bloods shooting at one another over some young lady or an affair of honour. You've probably found these people a bit different from our friends at home, eh, Dr. Torrence?"

"Well, I've not had much experience of them yet," said Roscoe. "But from the little I've seen I must say the ladies here look lovelier than they do even in London Society."

Warner nodded.

"Well sir, as two fellow countrymen," he said, "we might be excused saying that our English girls are the prettiest in the world, but by God sir, I think these high-born Southern women are lovelier still. They've got a grace and a charm that our own people've not even dreamed of. I often think it must be their mixed French or Spanish ancestry or the climate or the lazy lives they lead."

"Perhaps", suggested Roscoe, "these ladies respond to the way the Southern men treat them. I've gathered that the men here regard their womenfolk in a different light from what we do in England. They seem to carry chivalry much farther than most of us do at home."

Warner laughed.

"They certainly do. You know, sir, these Southerners

have never got over reading the *Waverley Novels*. They've become a sort of secondary Bible or Koran down here in the South, and they try to run their love affairs with medieval chivalry and valour. They're just Sir Walter Scott crazy. The young bloods here seem to spend their time making love to the ladies and watching for studied insults so that they can have affairs of honour at dawn. You'll find the columns of the papers full of challenges, apologies and studied insults. It keeps the Press going."

"They do seem to put their womenfolk on a pedestal," said Roscoe.

"My God they do," agreed Warner, laughing. "They hold them up so high I wonder the pretty things don't often get dizzy and fall off." Then he lowered his voice. "But you have to be pretty careful, you know, what you say about the ladies here. These fellows won't wait for explanations if they think you're slighting their women-folk. They shoot first and talk afterwards."

"I must say I enjoy hearing them talk," said Roscoe. "The women's voices fascinate me. They're very soft and musical."

"They are," Warner agreed. "When a Southern lady opens her mouth she talks music, and when I first came out here I just fell in love with their voices. I expect that's their Latin origin coming out again. They sound lazy and languid when they open their mouths, but these Southern women are mighty sprightly and merry when you get to know them. And", he added, suddenly looking reminiscent, "they can be hellish fiery and obstreperous when they get their heckle up."

Roscoe laughed at the man's expression.

"That sounds like the voice of experience," he bantered.

"Well, sir, perhaps it is," Warner admitted with reluctance. "Fact is, I came very near marrying a Southern girl when I first settled here in Orleans. It must have been her voice, for she wasn't wealthy, or even a raving beauty.

But I'd also got a fiancée in Boston, Massachusetts, and when she got wind of this affair she came South. I had to choose between a straitlaced New England household and a Southern one."

Roscoe looked puzzled. "And you chose a Northern home?"

"No, sir. I didn't exactly do any choosing. It was done for me. Mrs. Warner, as I say, came from Boston and wasn't going to allow any mere Southern girl to get over her. No sir, I reckon I came off best in the end. These Southerners have more charm and fascination and beauty than any other women in the world, and what they don't know about the art of coquetry and being attractive to men isn't worth a damn. But once they're married they're pretty exacting mistresses and a man don't get much liberty afterwards."

Roscoe looked gloomy.

"You may be right," he said after a pause. "But I expect it takes all kinds of women to make up even Southern society, and there are probably kind and generous ones amongst them as well as the others. At least one hopes so."

"Well, if you're thinking of marrying——"

"Oh no," Roscoe said hurriedly, "I've no intention in that direction—just at present at any rate. I only suggest that there must be a percentage of Southern ladies who are *not* spoilt by being lifted on to the pedestals their men-folk keep for them."

"Perhaps you're right," Warner admitted, "but even if the men don't spoil them, the servants do. A real Southern lady doesn't have to do a handsturn for herself from the time she's born to the day she dies. There's always a houseful of servants at her beck and call. Now I'd like to meet the woman who can remain unspoilt in those conditions."

Roscoe's eyes twinkled as he glanced at his companion.

"Warner," he said, grinning, "you're a man after my own heart. I don't mind telling you that when I left England I told myself I was through with women. The trip I was making to study fevers in Brazil was largely the result of this unfortunate affair. A broken heart, as a novelist would describe it, had made me wish the whole sex could be drowned at birth—except that but for women we doctors would have very few patients——"

"And no confinements."

"Well, no," Roscoe admitted with a mischievous smile in his eyes. "But your mood would have exactly fitted mine when I left home, and what you say now only fires me with a desire to find out for myself whether these Southern women are as you say: beautiful and charming on the surface, but spoilt, imperious and selfish underneath. I feel like postponing my trip to the Amazon till I've settled the question."

Warner turned around in his chair and faced Roscoe.

"You'll need to be careful," he said in all seriousness, "or they'll be finding out more about you than you do about them, and you'll wake up and discover yourself married with a petulant wife, no money, a mortgaged house and a swarm of coloured servants, before you know where you are."

Roscoe leant back and gave vent to his hearty laugh.

"Well if you aren't the best antidote to Love's Young Dream," he exclaimed. Then he became serious. "But the coloured servants would be a problem. I just can't stand this slavery business at any price. It oughtn't to exist to-day in a civilized country."

Warner cut a cigar. "My wife won't have any slaves in the house, either," he said, placidly. "She'll only allow freed servants in and insists on paying them. They feel pretty strongly about it up in New England."

"Don't you?"

Before replying Warner held a fizzling sulphur match

to the end of his cheroot. "Well, I used to when I first came over," he said, throwing the match away, "I'd read about the horrors of slavery and Wilberforce's speeches and so on. And I was prepared to find a lot of cruelty here. But you know, the more I see of the negroes the more I can understand that they need a firm hand all the time to make them work at all and to keep 'em out of mischief. I've seen some of the trouble they can make when they get out of hand."

"But why should they be forced to work," demanded Roscoe. "They never came here of their own free will. I've seen just how they're brought here. I've seen—"

"I know your argument. Why should the niggers be forced to work? That's what all the abolitionists say. But they're here now, aren't they, and you can't expect the people here to keep them for nothing, can you?"

"I wouldn't suggest that," said Roscoe, "but why must they be slaves? Why can't they employ them and pay wages, as we do the labouring classes at home, or send 'em back to Africa?"

Warner gave Roscoe a searching look. "On the whole the lot of the slaves here", he said, "is better than the majority of the working classes in England. Think of the misery that's to be found amongst the mill hands in the Midlands or the miners in Wales when trade's bad. Nobody can give them work; nobody looks after them. Whole families starve in filthy hovels. Out here, even if the cotton crop fails or there's a slump in sugar, the slaves are still kept and fed. They're much better off with a good master than if they were free to be employed like English labourers."

"And what about them when they have a bad master?"

"Well there are arguments against everything," Warner replied patiently. "And there *are* a few hard masters—planters that work their slaves harder'n they ought. But you know, Dr. Torrence, slaves are valuable property

and it doesn't pay to ruin them by overwork. Besides, a man that treats his slaves badly is ostracized here. Society won't accept him. Most of the slaves in the plantations, and the servants in these town houses are devoted to their masters and mistresses, and I can tell you that quite the majority are well cared for and lead happy and indulgent lives. They just become part of the family."

"That's all very well," Roscoe continued unchecked, "but when your good master dies or gets his estate into difficulties, what's to stop all the slaves being sold to bad masters, and families ruthlessly broken up?"

Warner sighed and with difficulty suppressed a yawn.

"I know the arguments against the institution," he said. "My wife kept them up until I got rid of an excellent house boy I'd bought. She's tried for years to get me to read that book of Mrs. Stowe's—what is it—"

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin?*"

"That's it. Came out a few years ago. Did you ever read it?"

"No, but we heard about it in England. It caused quite a sensation here, didn't it?"

"Sensation? You should have heard them. It raised hell. They won't even allow copies to be sold in the South here." Warner chuckled. "The people in the North thought Mrs. Stowe was a new Messiah and that book became a sort of divine revelation to some of them. God knows what stories she collected about slavery—I told you I haven't read it—but my wife brought a copy of it with her. One day, soon after we were married and living on Fontaine Street, she showed it to a Southern lady who'd called. Whew! It was a long time before we made friends with any other ladies in the town again."

"I think," said Roscoe, "perhaps I'd better read it."

"I shouldn't if I were you. My wife has said if only I'd read it it would convert me. But it'd be a damn sight too uncomfortable being an abolitionist down here with

a business in this town. Besides I haven't got time to go in for that sort of thing. There've been folks trying for years to explain how uneconomical and ruinous the slave system is. Why only last year—or was it the summer before?—another book raised hell down here. A book by a North Carolinian named Helper, a man that once ran a plantation I believe. *The Impending Crisis in the South* it was called, full of unanswerable arguments and figures, but I never got far with it." Warner sipped his drink. "If the Southerners need slaves to work their plantations and mills and homes, and prefer to put up with the inevitable snags of the system; well that's their pigeon. It doesn't quite agree with the views of freedom and liberty we were brought up on at home, but it's not for me to interfere. If it weren't for Mrs. Warner's views I'd buy a couple of niggers to work the garden to-morrow. But my wife's too much of a Puritan."

And he sighed again.

"Could I just have a look through your paper?" Roscoe asked as he picked up Warner's copy of the New Orleans *Picayune*. Warner nodded affably and gave his attention to two young girls in hooped skirts who were passing slowly arm in arm down the other side of the street. It seemed a pity their little bonnets hid their faces, for he felt certain they were both pretty, and any way there was something enticing about the way they walked.

Roscoe rustled the leaves of the paper back and forth until his eye caught a column of announcements in small type.

"Whatever apologies the people here may make for slavery," he said, while Warner suppressed a groan, "they can't pretend there isn't a hell of a lot of cruelty when the papers carry advertisements like this." He folded the paper and rested it on his knees. "What about this now?"

"Escaped: William, mulatto boy about 15, walks with

limp. Branded with H on right forearm. Ran away from Melville Plantation. Fifty dollars reward if recaptured.

"Ran away: Cicely, 26, with child in arms; speaks French, English. Tall, good features. Has gold rings through ears. Two hundred dollars reward, dead or alive.

"Boy John, 18. Black, well formed, strong. Left ear cut off, back much scarred. Branded in left hand with W D monogram. Ran away last Thursday. Reward for news of this nigger, dead or alive.

"Aunt Tannie, mulatto, about 30, walks with back bent. Carries Bible, reads slowly, speaks French. Ran away from Lawson Plantation. Persons bringing her back alive will have hundred dollars reward."

Roscoe folded the newspaper and handed it back.

"While that sort of thing appears every day in the papers", he said grimly, "how can people pretend there isn't suffering amongst the negroes? Do you think they *enjoy* being branded and mutilated and lashed with nobody to protect them?"

Warner lowered his legs to the floor and stood up, stretching.

"My dear fellow," he said looking down at Roscoe with a faintly indulgent expression. "When you've lived here a few more years you'll get entirely used to having slavery all round you. It's not as bad as you seem to think—as I used to think when I first came out from England—and if there are cases of cruelty showing up every now and then, remember they are few and far between, and these niggers' hides are a dāmn sight tougher than yours or mine. Now I must run along to my office to see old Cap'n Hickey—I'd like you to meet him some time. His real name's Hickman, but every one calls him Old Hickey. He's quite a character. He probably wants to see me about the mortgage on his old *Magnolia Bloom*. I don't think the old boy's been doing so well with her this summer. She's a bit too slow to compete with these modern boats.

"Well, sir," he added, extending his hand, "I'm right glad, as they say here, to have met you, and I hope we'll meet again."

When he had gone, Roscoe picked up the *Picayune* again and began to read the news, but between the lines his mind's eye conjured up a scene on the deck of the *Black Arrow* when his hands tore helplessly at the hatches while below two hundred negroes lay chained together, suffocated in their terrible prison. . . .

CHAPTER VII

NEXT morning Roscoe walked down to the waterfront and leaned against a strong, warm wind that blustered across the broad river. The yellow waters of the Mississippi leaped and tumbled along the foot of the levee, breaking against the wooden piles of the quays with little angry crashes, like dogs snarling playfully. Here and there, where the current ran swift and turbulent, wavelets turned and flashed a muddy white as the fresh breeze played with them.

Holding his grey tall hat firmly on his head he watched the lively scene along the wharves. Beyond the masts of the seagoing ships, whose cock-billed yards and tracery work of rigging rose above the roofs of the warehouses like saplings in a wood, lay two miles of steamboat landings. In a solid phalanx as far as the eye could see the steamboats hugged the levee, their thin smokestacks standing up like a forest of black branchless trees.

With a quickening of the pulse Roscoe walked past the last of the tall ocean-going ships, whose graceful figure-head curved over the wharf above him thrusting her long jibboom almost into the windows of the Cotton Exchange. Singing through her rigging the wind brought the compelling tang of the sea to his nostrils, the scent of ropes and canvas, of new paint and Stockholm tar, of frying bacon and galley smoke, of clean swept decks and long discharged cargoes: he sniffed that embracing smell of ocean-going ships that has recalled many a sea-weary man from settling to a drab life on shore, and a growing excitement quickened his steps.

On he walked past bales and boxes of merchandise, around ragged groups of chattering negroes, on beyond the white front of the Customs House, to the turmoil of the steamboat landings. He stopped and watched the busy scene aboard one of the packets, whose name *Cincinnati* swept around the gigantic paddlebox in gilt letters a foot high. At each end of her low black hull, almost at the level of the water itself, the broad gangways or stages were shaking under the trampling feet of blacks as they shouted and chattered, shoulderering bales and crates and stacking them on the deck. The mate's voice from the foredeck rose hoarsely above the other din as he strode here and there shouting orders. Intrigued, Roscoe stopped and listened to him. A landsman, he thought, would probably direct the stowing of the freight like this: "Oh, I'll have that bale over here—that's it, behind that pile of boxes. Ah, and those barrels, will you put them in the corner of the deck by those steps, please? That crate, a little more to the right, Moses, please. No, to the right, I said. A bit more this way. That's right. Now hurry along and bring some more of that stuff. We've got to be going, you know."

Not so the mate of the *Cincinnati*. Spitting over the rail and rubbing his hands together he strode about the freight deck like a turkey gobbler in a rage. His untrimmed goatee snapped and bristled as he shouted and his hands clenched and shook vigorously to punctuate his orders. But he never so much as touched one of the negro stevedores: his tongue lashed them instead.

"Look lively thar, you doggone lot o' flat-footed bastards! D'yer think we're layin' here all day fer yer to git that ar morsel o' freight aboard? Step out thar—ease that ar bale aft here—Christ, Aft I said!—Steady thar—STEADY—haul it for'd here—ease away—that'll do—Say you! What in heck are yer lazy good fer nuthin devils doin' with that ar bar'l? Roll it aft there to starb'd—

STAR'D! Christ don't you-all know which side yer right hand is? Blame me if they don't nuther. Up end it, yer black sods and stow that ar bale atop of the bar'l's. Look lively now, this ain't a funeral!"

Grinning and jaunty, unabashed by the mate's familiar blasphemy, the negroes went on with their loading, while above them, the decks, like verandahs across the front of a big house, were filled with passengers in black broad-cloth coats and tall hats and fluttering bonnets and hoop skirts. Higher still, above the upper deck, Roscoe could see the lordly pilot through the window of the wheel-house quietly smoking his cigar, and the uniformed boy, proudest figure of them all, standing carefully in full view of his envious chums on the levee, his hand ready to strike the great bell that hung in its pedestal on the Texas deck. Black pine smoke was belching forth from the convolvolous-like tops of the two lofty stacks whence it was swept down in a whirling cloud past the roofs of the warehouses, and flags were flying stiffly in the breeze from the jackstaffs forward and the verges staff at the stern.

As he paused near the foot of one of the stages Roscoe was confronted by an eager negro boy with a grinning face lit up by white teeth.

"Is yo' gwine up to Memphis, sah?" asked the lad. "Dis yer's de boat. Tote yo' baggage fo' yo', sah?"

Roscoe could not hide a smile at the apparition with his battered brimless straw hat perched back on his woolly head, his impish eyes rolling their whites at him, the torn red striped shirt and the ragged pantaloons just held up by half a suspender.

"Not to-day, Sambo," he said. "I'm not a passenger."

"Mebbe Ah c'n tote yo' baggage nuther time, sah?" said the boy as he touched his forehead before skipping away towards a group of passengers.

The great bell suddenly boomed out and the uniformed

boy on the hurricane deck, with one pitying glance down at his friends, walked back into the texas where he stood nonchalantly leaning against one of the windows in full view of the crowd on the levee. Only the rules of the service, and the probable disastrous effects, prevented him from copying his master, the pilot, and lighting up a long black cheroot for his goggle-eyed old school pals to envy.

The stages were being raised on their tackles to the accompaniment of soft negro voices and the raucous bark of the mate. White lace handkerchiefs fluttered like captive doves along the upper decks and tall hats were waved above the rows of faces. The whistle, with a first asthmatic splutter, found its voice and delicate hands were clasped over ears not used to such rude sounds.

From within bells jangle. The steamboat begins to breathe, gasping through the 'scape pipes while the great paddlewheels come to life and churn the muddy water into foam. The rows of waving hands, fluttering handkerchiefs, bonneted faces, move away, while the yellow water, writhing and angry, grows between the ship and the levee.

"Good-bye! Good-bye—see you at the races—my love to Aunt Letty—won't you-all promise another trip—come back before Christmas, do—I cain't heah yuh, if yuh holler so—till next spring, honey—good-bye, suh—"

Hands still waving, eyes dancing, eyes wistful, handkerchiefs already moist, laughing faces, sad faces, faces mutely hidden in silent grief, a little forced laughter, some talk, strained as conversation is when a ship moves out and human ties are broken; desultory waving, one last "good-bye" floating across the water, hurried by the wind and the steamboat draws out beyond the quays. With beating paddles, chimneys belching black clouds, flags flying bravely from the staffs and the passengers

now but three black lines along the decks, she forges ahead like a great hotel walking the waters.

For some while Roscoe stood watching the *Cincinnati* threshing past the long row of steamboats, her paddle-guards almost grazing their sterns in the traditional manner as she forged up against the fast-running current, a feeling of excitement rising within him. Some long-forgotten desire was coming to life again, some wish that made his eyes follow the steamboat until her white bulk had passed around the next bend and all he could see of her was her two tall stacks moving slowly beyond the distant levee with the smoke from them drifting away across the hidden fields.

The idea that had grown out of Warner's chance remark about the mortgage on Captain Hickman's boat was opening up an entirely new vista in his mind's eye. From devotion to the ills of mankind at London hospitals and in his consulting room, he saw himself able to follow an ambition that he had not thought about since he was a schoolboy. Commanding a ship and going to sea in her was scarcely an ambition for a doctor, and had had no place in his thoughts for twenty years. Now, however, his life had sustained such an upheaval since he had left England, so many new worlds—cruel and horrible, perhaps, but also hospitable and entrancing—had been opened before his eyes, that he felt like a youth again on the threshold of life. His natural business instincts would at last be given full reign while his professional work took a rest. It would be like a holiday to lead an entirely new life and the thought made him quicken his steps past the endless rows of steamboats.

If he followed Warner's suggestion, he told himself, and bought a share in a steamboat—why, if he even lost all the money eventually, it would be worth the excitement, the sheer joy of doing something he had wanted to do ever since he could remember. To own a steamboat,

to be able to pace her decks and feel: "This ship belongs to me: I can take her where I like," to venture into that romantic world of Mississippi steamboating and—who knows? perhaps build up a magnificent line of boats like the Anchor, the Express or the Crescent City Lines—why shouldn't even that be possible? Some of the biggest companies had had less promising beginnings.

He continued his walk and his step became jaunty and quite out of keeping with his tall hat and fashionable clothes, he lightly skipped over two or three ropes that stretched knee-high from bollards. He mingled with the noise and bustle of the wharf, looking up at the rows of steamboats impatiently straining at their warps with the feeling that already he was himself a part of this great business. The smell of the pine smoke, of hot tallow and escaping steam, of tarred cordage, molasses, paint and varnish, of stale tobacco smoke, plush, polished mahogany and people that filtered from the interiors of all these floating palaces came to his nostrils like the scent of a woman with beckoning eyes.

As he stopped to gaze up at the towering decks of a big St. Louis packet, a gust of wind suddenly caught his hat and carried it bouncing and skipping along the levee. Immediately half a dozen ragged negro boys were off in pursuit, whooping and shouting with laughter, their limp hands swinging and skinny black legs leaping through the dust. And as though by magic two equally ragged-looking mongrels, a shaggy yellow one and the other black with white mangy tail, appeared from nowhere and joined in the chase, running in and out the black legs, barking and generally assisting as dogs always do.

Away went the hat, a flurry of light grey suddenly swept up in a gust and carried forward in a wild leap. The niggers waved their arms, grinning at each other and trying to avoid the yapping dogs. Other loungers

pulled the straws out of their mouths or swallowed them in excitement, hitched up their pants and joined in the fray; and while Roscoe followed at a more sedate gait, conscious of looking something of a fool in his well-cut clothes and bare head, he began to shake so with merriment that he just had to give up and stand with hands resting on his hips while the darkies closed in on the errant grey.

In a scrum they bent down to grasp it, but a mischievous hand—or perhaps a freak gust of wind—sent it flying skywards once more, and again the whooping crowd dashed after it with the two dogs leading. Over and over it turned, racing along for a time on its brim like a mad hoop, then up into the air and down on to the crowd, until the yellow dog had it. Gripping the brim in his jaws so that the crown rose up and hid his face from view the friend of man dashed back through the crowd of darkies before they could stop themselves. Two or three were sent sprawling, cursing and shouting with laughter, while the others wheeled about with arms flying and teeth flashing. Back he came, the other mongrel racing beside him and trying to wrest the hat from his jaws.

With fresh whoops the negroes leapt after the two dogs and headed them off. The yellow thief, still unable to see where he was going, crashed into a bale of cotton and dropped the hat. Black-and-white at once seized it, but before he could make off the negroes were about him, and from the midst of the turmoil the hat, now a rather sorry-looking object, appeared held high in skinny arms out of reach of the leaping dogs.

Still whooping and dancing for sheer glee the negroes came back to where Roscoe had stopped, trying to conceal his merriment, while one of them straightened the brim, punched the worst dents out of the crown, and smoothed the nap with his forearm, to the advice offered by the others.

"Yo tak cyare wid de gennlemun's hat, Joe."

"Yo clumsy niggah. Gimme dat ar hat. Ah make um good as new. Yo watch muh."

"Yo leave me be. Ah knows what Ah's doin! Dat's more'n what yo ain't, nuther. Lemme go."

"Shush yo mouf, Sam, cain't yo see as Joe got de right touch now? Warn't Joe's pa Mas'r Willum's butler, huh?"

"Gib de gennlemun his hat, Joe."

The darkie held the hat out to Roscoe with a broad grin that lit up his merry face while the crowd stood around rolling their eyes.

"Dat ar houn' ain't did a power o' good to dis yer hat, Ah reckon, Mas'r," he said, kicking at the inquisitive yellow dog. "But mebbe hit ain't too bad fer Mas'r to wear agin."

Roscoe took the hat and turned it over. It had lost some of its pristine smartness and the teeth marks in the brim would not come out easily, but he pressed it at an angle on his head and gave the crown a final tap with his hand.

"Thank you, Joe," he said handing the boy a picayune and throwing a handful of small coins into the delighted group. "You've made a good job of it." For a moment the lanky negro stared at him, astonishment at the kind words delivered in the unexpected accent being too much for him.

"Thank yo, Mas'r," he murmured at last touching his crinkly head and staring with open mouth. "De Lawd bless yo, sah."

Feeling a little embarrassed, Roscoe moved on.

The quays seemed to go on for miles with endless rows of black stacks beside them rising in pairs above white decks and pilot-houses. And all the time boats were getting ready to back out while others swept in from the middle of the river and nosed their way up to the levee landing.

The scorching sun made the road almost too hot to

walk on and Roscoe began to think of something cool and sparkling in a tall frosted glass. He turned towards a block of buildings behind the levee where there might be an hotel with a cool lounge bar and came across one or two carriages, a single-seater buggy and a group of men standing outside a large stone building with a colonnade front. Some of them were going in at a door that had a poster hung up beside it.

Out of curiosity he crossed the road to read the announcement:

AUCTION OF SLAVES

"A Number of Fine, Well-Trained House Boys and Women, together with several Field Hands, the property of the Estate of the Late Robert Thébaut, Esquire, dec., will be Sold by Auction in the Bourse at 12 o'clock midday To-day by order of the Exors., together with a Select Number of other Negroes."

There followed a short description of each of a number of the slaves to be sold.

Roscoe looked at his watch. It was half-past twelve. He hesitated, rubbing his hand against his chin thoughtfully, then with sudden decision, turned in at the door. Inside in the cool shade after the grilling heat of the roadway, he found the auction in progress. The auctioneer, an unhealthy-looking man with a thin sallow face, black sharp eyes and drooping black moustachios above a thin mouth and a clean-shaven chin, was standing on a wooden box so that he rose head and shoulders above the men grouped around him. Beside him, on another box, and holding himself up with almost royal pride, stood a young mulatto boy who was very handsome indeed. His fine features revealed the high birth of his father, whatever his mother may have been, and as his dark eyes travelled about the faces watching him, noting who were the bid-

ders, trying to gauge which of these men would become his new master, his face gave no sign of what he felt beneath his brown skin.

"He's a mighty fine buck but I reckon he's spoilt," Roscoe heard a man say behind him. "Old Thébaut was too damned easy with his boys."

"Sure," replied the man's companion, "but if I could run to his price I'd buy him. I'd soon lick him into shape. Fifteen hundred's my limit."

Fascinated, Roscoe watched the auctioneer driving up the bids.

"He's the finest boy we got here, gen'lemen," he said, waving a sheaf of papers towards the mulatto. "He's well trained in the house, speaks French and English, he can read and write some, and he's got a very good character. Why Mr. Thébaut—the Lord rest his soul," he added shaking his finger at the audience, "he told me himself las' time I was at his plantation, that Joshua here was a model butler and servant. Those, gen'lemen, was his very words. And furthermore, Joshua is a very *pious* lad. He reads his Bible, just like you and me."

There was a guffaw at this, but Roscoe saw no change of expression in the boy's face. Only his eyes looked a little more desperately at the faces of the various bidders.

"Sixteen hundred ain't enough fer a fine fellow like this yer," the auctioneer went on. "He oughter fetch not a penny less'n two thousand. Now, gen'lemen, which of you *appreciates* a fine boy when you see one?"

The bidding went on by spurts and pauses until Joshua was knocked down at eighteen-fifty. A grey-haired man with a goatee and side whiskers and a kind expression came forward and touched the mulatto's arm. Roscoe noticed a look of relief in the boy's face as he stepped down to join his new master, and for once there was a smile in his eyes. His buyer, thought Roscoe, must have had the reputation of being a kind master.

"Now gen'lemen," the auctioneer's voice called out again. "This time we have somep'n right smart. Stand up, Lulie, let the gen'lemen see you—and what you got."

A young girl of perhaps sixteen with coffee skin and delicate, almost beautiful, features stood up nervously on the slave block. Her black hair, tied in a becoming bunch with pink ribbon, was barely crinkly, while her large dark eyes drooped shyly beneath long black lashes. She stood with one arm hanging down at her side while the other hand held the folds of a cheap cotton dress across her breasts.

The men pressed about her, eager to buy, to possess. Bidding had started before Roscoe noticed that a black woman, grey haired and shapeless, was holding Lulie's hand and looking up at her and back at the faces crowding around with a wild, pleading expression in her eyes.

"Nineteen hundred."

"I'll make it two thousand."

"Hell! I'll see you. Two thousand *two* hundred."

There was a hush in the room. The bidding had suddenly settled between two men only, and the small crowd leaned forward watching them. One was a tall youngish man, in the middle thirties, with an aristocratic face and a nonchalant, humorous expression about his clean-shaven mouth. He was dressed in a well-cut fawn coat and light grey check pants in the latest fashion and wore his stylish fawn hat on the back of his head. The other bidder was a gross, hard-faced, grey-haired man with coarse whiskers, a protruding under lip, a great paunch and rough, dirty clothes. Between bids he kept his little pig's eyes on the girl who seemed to cringe beneath his gaze.

The young man looked at the girl and turned towards the other.

"You seem mighty set on getting her, Sliver," he said in a drawling voice. "I'll go to two thousand three fifty." Then he turned his back on the slave dealer and flicked

some imaginary dust from his coat with gentle fingers.

There was something delicate and refined in all his movements and Roscoe wondered who he was and what he could be doing at a slave auction, bidding for a young mulatto girl.

"That's young Faverel," some one remarked in an undertone behind him. "Reckon he don't want Joe Sliver to get that gal."

"Naw, but I guess he'll have to bid higher nor that to get her," replied the speaker's companion. "Joe's set on that gal ef you tell me. She'd make a good investment at Ma Tolley's house on Lafitte Street."

"Sure—ef she could take it fer a year or two. Trouble is these yer purty gals don't last moe'n a year."

"Hell, a year would be enough with a gal with her looks ef you worked her prop'ly. Listen to the biddin'."

There was silence for a moment.

"Make it two thousand five hundred," growled Sliver as he turned and glared at his adversary.

Faverel hesitated, glanced at the girl, then with an expression of regret in his fine eyes turned to the slave dealer.

"I deplore yo' recklessness, Sliver," he drawled with a sardonic smile, "but I regret I must leave her to yo' tender mercies. Mind you treat her *kindly*," he added with emphasis. "You know the kind of home she's been reared in." Then he turned and made his way out through the crowd.

Lulie suddenly raised her eyes and would have leapt after him, but the old black woman held her hand.

"Oh Mas'r, please buy me," the girl wailed, "don't let Mas'r Slivuh get me. Please, oh please, Mas'r." Then she fell on her knees and buried her face in her mother's bosom, breaking into heartrending sobs. The tears began to course down the old woman's face.

"Doan' cry, honey," she wept, stroking her daughter's

soft hair. "We's bin sold togedder. We ain't gwine a be parted no mo'. Dry yo' eyes, chile."

Sliver caught the girl's arm and dragged her to her feet. Her mother still clung to her.

"Here you, git back," he said. "I ain't bought *you*."

Lulie's mother dropped to her knees clasping her daughter's trembling hands, a stricken look in her eyes.

"Oh Mas'r," she wailed. "Ain't you gwine a buy me too? Please buy me, Mas'r. Ah ain't nevah bin parted f'om mah chile befo'. Lulie's de only chile Ah got lef' now. Oh please, Mas'r, buy me too. Ah c'n work. Look mah hands. Ah done work in de house, Ah c'n cook an' sew an' tend de table. Ah allus bin a good mammy, an' Ah c'n—"

Sliver pushed the old woman away with his foot.

"Get back," he growled, "I don't want you. You're too old to be worth anything now." But she threw her hands out towards him.

"Ah ain't too old, Mas'r," she cried, desperate. "'Deed Ah ain't. Ah c'n work. Oh, please, please Mas'r take me wid mah li'l Lulie. She'm all Ah got!"

But with a harsh guffaw Sliver turned his back on her and led the sobbing Lulie away, while her mother sank to the floor in the bitterness of despair.

"Three hundred for the old woman."

All heads turned at Faverel's voice. No one had noticed him come back again.

"No higher bid?" asked the auctioneer. "All right, sir, you can take her. I reckon 'she's lucky.'"

Lulie's mother got up slowly. She hardly seemed to understand what was happening while young Faverel signed the bill and took the paper that made over the old woman to him. In a daze of tears she followed her new master out of the room.

Roscoe looked around at the faces of the men. The brief drama that he had just witnessed had left him sick and

indignant; sick at his own feeling of impotence to save the pretty Lulie, and angry that a group of men should stand by without a protest and let a young girl be separated from her own mother to face God knew what fate. It was but little comfort to know that the poor broken mother had at least found a kind master and probably a good home. What was to him a terrible revelation was to see these helpless black people, who had obviously been reared in a comfortable home educated by a kind mistress, owned by an indulgent master, now, by the death of that master, put up for sale to any men who could bid the most for them, husbands to be separated from wives, children torn from their parents.

With his heart aching and indignation rising behind his eyes like a mist, Roscoe was only vaguely conscious of other blacks mounting the block, facing the bidding in abject silence, and being marched off to their various buyers. The dealers were here to-day on the lookout for good stock, for it was well known in New Orleans that the Thébaut plantation had reared the best slaves in all the country, and the bidding was brisk.

Roscoe was about to turn away and go out into the sunshine, away from this sink of human despair, when some remark of the auctioneer's drew forth a derisive laugh from the men around him.

A middle-aged negro in a cotton singlet and ragged white pants was being offered for sale. Standing on the block his tall frame brought his head and shoulders well above those around him, and as he turned his head his grey hair gleamed softly in a shaft of light from one of the windows. To his practised eye Roscoe saw that the black was sick and weak and needed nursing.

"Now gen'lemen," the man went on, "this old fellow ain't all that bad! Look at his teeth, sir. All right, *don't* look at his teeth. Mebbe he ain't got so many. Never mind, feel of his muscles. Say now, ain't they just the

strongest pair of arms of any hardworkin' buck you never did see, huh?"

The crowd gave another guffaw as a brutal-looking man stepped up to the negro and felt his arms. Then he stepped back, tried the man's knees, his ribs, and finally punched him hard in the midriff. The old negro gasped, doubled up, then slowly, still breathing heavily with his face twisted in pain, stood upright once more a look of resigned patience in his eyes.

The dealer shook his head and turned away.

"Naw, heain't good fer nuthin'," he said, spitting loudly.

"Reckon he'd die on yuh befo' yuh got him home," remarked some one.

"Might come in useful as a statue in the gyarden," suggested another, and there was a general laugh.

The best of the slaves had been sold; only a few trash seemed to remain and the crowd was dispersing.

"Aw, mebbe he'd do in the cotton fields for six months," said a third.

"He ain't a field hand," said some one beside Roscoe, "look at the bastard's hands. Just a house nigger and no damn good at that."

"Well, say a hundred dollars."

There was silence while the dealer who had spoken began to wish he had remained silent.

In the negro's face there was a quiet dignity, while behind his calm eyes lay a trustfulness that only kind upbringing could have implanted. Looking about him he caught Roscoe's eye and for a moment Roscoe felt a bond of sympathy go out to the helpless old black. His own heart was beating quickly and there was a dry feeling at the back of his throat.

"Hundred and fifty, mebbe."

Another dealer's bid.

"Reckon that ar's mighty cheap—if he lives," laughed some one.

The negro pulled himself upright with an effort and gazed beyond the heads of the white men towards the window where the sun streamed in. He looked then as though no pain or sorrow on this earth could hurt him, as though hope lay in his trust in God.

"Cain't any of you gen'lemen make a raise on a hundred and fifty?" demanded the auctioneer. "What, no? Well I reckon this fine, healthy buck'll just have to go——"

"Two hundred."

Several heads turned at the voice. The auctioneer raised his hand. "Any raise on two hundred dollars? Goin' at two hundred. Name, sir?"

Roscoe cleared his dry throat.

"Torrence. Roscoe Torrence."

CHAPTER VIII

BEN's lifelong training as a gentleman's bodyguard and servant and his naturally docile, grateful nature, helped Roscoe to make what the latter considered to be the best of a "deucedly awkward situation". Impetuous and forceful as he had always been in many ways, Roscoe had not bargained for becoming a slave owner so soon, when all his awakened principles revolted at the institution and he at least regarded himself as a confirmed abolitionist.

But his conscience felt appeased when he had taken out the necessary papers freeing Ben; but the old man steadfastly refused to take them, asking Roscoe merely to keep them for him.

"You understand, Ben," Roscoe told him, "that if ever you feel you want to go you are free to do so. I'll keep your papers safely, and any time you ask for them you can have them."

"Thank you, Mas'r Ross," the old fellow replied. "Ah'd ruther you keep dem papers, kase Ah doan' want to leave you. Ah reckon", he added with a shrewd smile, "you want a lil' lookin' ahfter, an' Ah's jes' de right pusson to do that. Yassuh."

The old negro's gratitude was touching, and when Roscoe also bought Ben a fresh copy of the Bible with three or four coloured illustrations in it the old man's eyes sparkled with delight. He helped Ben to trace his own name on the fly-leaf, guiding his wondering hand like a teacher in an infant class, and while the old man sat slowly spelling out the words that brought so much com-

fort to his simple soul, Roscoe began to feel that perhaps after all these coloured folk could lead happy lives in the bondage of a kind master and that they did perhaps need the understanding and patience and guidance that they would never get if they worked for their living like the labouring classes in England. It was vaguely satisfying to feel, too, that his impulsive action at the slave auction had brought peace and happiness at any rate to one hapless darkie whose fate otherwise would have been brutal and cruel.

Ben was installed in the servants' quarters at the "Palmetto", and Roscoe was able to share with the other families resident in the hotel the satisfaction of being waited on by his own personal servant. Although at first he was inclined to be a little stiff and awkward in Ben's presence he soon learned the comfort of a faithful servant who anticipated his every wish, looked after his small wardrobe, set out his shirts and collars and clothes with loving silent hands, and made helpful suggestions in his soft, melodious voice when Roscoe felt too hot or irritable to make up his mind what to wear on the street or to eat at dinner. Before he had been many more weeks at the "Palmetto", Roscoe began to wonder how on earth he had got along without a personal servant before. His gentle humility and sincere gratitude soon endeared the old man to Roscoe, who shortly came to regard Ben as his friend for life.

This association with a well-brought-up negro of a good type was the best thing that could have happened to Roscoe at this time. Ready as he had been from his shocking introduction to slavery methods to condemn the entire institution as diabolic and all slave owners as callous masters, he was seeing—even taking a part in the other side of the picture. Whereas his ideas on the subject had begun as intolerant and his remedies as drastic as any shocked-faced abolitionist from the North, his notions

were being modified, his indignation subdued, and his eyes opened by personal contact with a negro friend, virtually in a state of slavery. It was an insight into a problem, a section of Southern life, from which many a fiery abolitionist, who had never visited the South, would have benefited.

From the first Roscoe took a liking to Captain Hickman when Warner introduced them out on the hotel verandah one afternoon. Hickman walked lamely, leaning heavily on a hickory stick; he was broad shouldered, short and stout, with a round florid face, and white hair where hair remained, and he would have looked the typical steamboat captain with his peak cap and double-breasted jacket had it not been for his face and the angle at which he wore his cap on the back of his head.

It was impossible to look at Captain Hickman's eyes, set beneath bushy white eyebrows like merry currants in folds of flesh and at his mobile mouth and double chin without feeling that nature had been in a frolicsome mood when she made Isaiah Lucius Hickman. His nose, like a prickly-pear, was of a hue that more than one pilot said he had mistaken for the *Magnolia Bloom*'s larboard light, and if any further evidence were needed to convince one that Captain Hickman had come straight from comic opera the gestures of his fat red hands were sufficient.

"Why Dr. Torrence I sure am glad to know you," he burst out in a high voice as he hobbled forward and shook Roscoe's hand. "I'm Cap'n Hickman as Dave Warner here's jest bustin' to tell you, but o' course every mortal soul up and down the river knows me as Old Hickey. Yes sir, Old Hickey. Me. What d'ye think of that, eh?" And he screwed up his eyes and shook both his chins with a high-pitched cackling laugh. "Well sir, I'm mighty glad to meet another Englishman, and welcome him to this old city. There's positively a colony of English folks

right here in Orleans, but jest why y'all come out here to this gosh darn climate sure beats me. My, but it's hot enough this afternoon to melt the fat out of a skeleton," he added mopping under the peak of his cap with a brilliant handkerchief.

"I don't mind the heat," said Roscoe smiling down at the other's perspiring face, "if it's like this in London people die of the heat, but here you wear more suitable clothes and have better food and cool drinks——"

"Ah, that's it," said Captain Hickman glancing round, "cool drinks."

"I'll call the boy," said Warner hastily. "Meanwhile take a seat Captain," he added pushing one of the cane chairs forward.

"Thank'ee, David. It's real cool up here on this verandah, and—oh!" The old man stopped, rigid, with a hand clasped to his side and his face contorted. Then he moved again cautiously. "It's this goshdarn gout," he explained at Roscoe's look of inquiry. "Just a twinge, but my! I have to be mighty careful." He lowered himself carefully into the chair, laying his cane beside him and lifted his good leg on to the rail.

"It's a nasty complaint," said Roscoe as they lit cheroots "and it's not easy to get rid of."

"Don't I know it!"

"But I might be able to suggest something for it."

Captain Hickman shot a glance under his brows at Roscoe.

"No, Dr. Torrence," he said cautiously, "my wife's made me see half a dozen doctors, one time and another, and", he shook his head, "they all suggest about the same thing. Lay off everything I like and live on toast and water."

Roscoe grinned.

"Perhaps I'd be a bit more lenient than that, Captain," he said mischievously. "I'd only suggest your giving up

meat, puddings, tobacco, all forms of iced drinks, liquor, cards and of course anything that excites you in any way. That would be part of the cure. But to complete it I'd have to get a leech, or perhaps a couple. You've been making too much blood, d'you see, and I'd have to bleed you. A pint to-day, two pints to-morrow, three the next, and so on—”

Captain Hickman's face was a study in horror. Then his mouth twitched in a incredulous grin.

“Aw shucks, Doctor, you're only foolin'! I thought you were real serious at first.”

“A gin fizz or a julep, Captain?” asked Warner when the negro waiter had appeared.

“That sounds like music to the ears,” exclaimed the old man. “David, I'd like the tallest and coolest mint julep that's ever been mixed in the ‘Palmetto’ here. And looky here, Sambo,” he added, turning to the waiter, “bring me a straw with mine *and* a extry good sprig of mint.”

The negro bowed solemnly, expressionless and departed.

“Nothing better'n a good mint julep,” said the captain, his eyes twinkling. “Whatever your goshdarn doctors say about liquor bein' poison for gout. D'you know, sir, what I find the best thing for *my* gout?”

Roscoe shook his head.

“Well, sir, being a landsman mebbe you won't believe me. Folks don't often,” said the captain with a droll wink at Warner, “but when I'm aboard the old *Magnolia* I have a glassful of the river water, well stirred, every morning. It's got to be kept stirred, sir, for if you leave it be a few minutes all the mud settles to the bottom of the glass and then you miss the goodness. There's something about this Mississippi mud that's got all the things we mortals need against ailments and sickness. Believe me, sir, the mud in this river has as much nutriment and food value

for every cubic foot as a square yard of ornery stew. Or mebbe I mean a cubic yard."

"I can well believe it," Roscoe agreed with a smile.

"Why sir," the captain continued, "I've known whole families live on nothin' else, come high water—that's flood tide—when all the levees have been covered and you can't see anything but trees for miles. After they've et all the leaves and the bark off of the trees, and mebbe polished off any stray cattle or hosses that've come floating down, they turn to and drink a panful of river water, and if they've been starving before, believe me, they begin to fill out and recover after that."

"And then fever gets a hold?" suggested Roscoe watching Hickman's face shrewdly.

"Fever, sir?" The old man looked pained. "The *river* folks never get fever. They may shake a piece from the ague, or get a chill when the bad weather comes, but so long as they drink the river water and keep it stirred up so's they don't lose any of its goodness, why the river folk don't know what fever means. No sir, it's these yer city folks that get fever and the plague. You don't remember the outbreak in this city back in '53, do you? My, but that pretty nigh cleaned up this town. We dassn't bring the old *Magnolia* south of Baton Rouge. There warn't no boats leaving for six weeks. It was a mighty mean time for the folks here, because the army was called out to see that nobody left the city. And believe it or not, sir, I reckon it was all on account the folks here have their water filtered and all the goodness taken out of it"

"That's a very interesting theory, Captain Hickman," said Roscoe as the waiter handed round the tall glasses of amber liquid.

"You're welcome, sir," said the old man. "I reckon I can explain most things, one way or another," and he winked at Roscoe over the rim of his glass. After inhaling

the aroma of the mint the captain drew the sprig through his teeth and slowly chewed the leaves. Then he stirred the contents slowly, while the ice clinked against the sides of the glass, and held it up to the light.

"Only way to drink a julep," he said, as though delivering a profound truth. "Chew the leaves and get the full flavour of the mint first. Then get the whisky from the *bottom* of the glass first through a straw before the ice waters it. They don't make juleps here like my boy makes 'em in the passenger saloon." And with the straw between his lips the captain looked reminiscent.

Warner turned to the old man.

"Dr. Torrence would like to have a look over the *Magnolia*," he said. "He's—a little interested in steam-boats—aren't you Doctor?—and I thought that while she's laid up at the levee here——"

Captain Hickman's eyes sparkled.

"I'll be glad to show her to you," he said. "Of course, the old *Magnolia* may not be so big as some of these more up-to-date packets. And she hasn't quite so many trimmings. But," he added, proudly, "she'll hold her own with any but the fastest *up* river, provided she can pick the slack water. She only draws seven foot and that helps her in working up over the shoals."

"I'd like to see over her," said Roscoe watching the captain. "You say she's laid up?"

The old man looked embarrassed.

"Well, sir, she ain't exactly laid up," he hesitated. "But she—she's having a sort of spell alongside the levee here, d'you see, jest—uh—having a few alterations made to her." And he devoted his attention to his glass.

"She's got a writ nailed to the *texas*," explained Warner bluntly.

The captain swallowed audibly.

"Aw, now, David, you didn't oughter have started to tell everybody about it," he pleaded.

"Well, everybody knows. Everybody along the waterfront. And if we go aboard now Dr. Torrence'll see the writ right there, any way."

Captain Hickman looked so miserable that Roscoe laughed aloud.

"*Magnolia Bloom*'s a nice flowery name. I like the sound of it," he said. "I'm just itching to see her. Where is she now?"

"She got married and gave up acting," said the captain with a sigh.

Roscoe stared. "Who did?"

"Magnolia. Miss Magnolia Bloom, was a very beautiful actress, and was the hit of the season here in Orleans back in '38 when I bought the boat. I named her after Magnolia—but", he added, lowering his voice, "Mrs. Hickman don't know that. She still thinks the boat's named after a flower blossom! Poor Magnolia. She married a travelling show-boat manager, and when the first kid come along she gave up the stage."

While the old man drained his glass Roscoe gazed far away across the street towards a break in the buildings opposite where a pall of smoke indicated the position of the river wharves. Already he began to feel a personal connection with the steamboat fleets.

The Hickman's house was just outside the limits of New Orleans. It stood about a hundred yards back from the east bank of the river, and you approached it by a sand path leading off at right angles from the plank road that came from the city. Like the other houses in this scattered region it had its own water supply in a huge green painted butt that rested against one side of the house on high stilts while the house itself was raised above the ground on baulks. There was thus sufficient space beneath it to harbour a number of lazy mongrel dogs and a ruffled crowd of chickens and, in time of "high water", to allow

the flooded Mississippi to flow past to the depth of three feet or so without ruining the lower floor.

Again, like all the other houses along the narrow neck of low ground that separated Lake Pontchartrain from the river, "Claiborne" was of simple clapboard construction with a low roof harbouring but two upper rooms and a small front porch that ran the width of the house. From the front yard with its overgrown path you mounted four decidedly unsafe steps and then passed through the mosquito screen door and found yourself on the porch. Thence you could enter the house either by the main door leading into the sitting-room and so on to the back of the house, or by another window door at the other end of the porch leading into the main bedroom.

The house with its paint-blistered walls, the weed-grown path through the tall grass in the front yard, the porch steps that for years had threatened to collapse under the next person's weight, even the sad oaks back of the place with their long grey beards of moss, had an air of decay that seemed to lie over the whole lower region of the Mississippi Valley like a secret sorrow. Even the scenery was not elevating, for beyond the backyard, where the sun rose above the tops of the trees lay a region of flat, damp land. It stretched to the shore of the lake where clammy mists hung on autumn evenings and chill fingers brought ague and the shivers with their touch. From the front windows there was no view beyond the plank road, except the back of the levee. Only from one or other of the upper-storey windows might one watch a glimpse of passing steamboats when the rains or the melting snows far up the river brought the high water down to fill the levees to the brim and set the inhabitants of the valley watching anxiously for signs of flood. Then only could one glimpse the smokestacks, the upper works and the leisurely walking beam of steamboats as they glided past, their black hulls hidden behind the top of the levee.

Towards the south lay the wharves and warehouses of the New Orleans waterfront, where the steamboats jostled one another, arriving and leaving every few minutes, the familiar sounds of their whistles, their bells and the hiss of steam from the 'scape pipes continually filling the valley.

Mrs. Hickman did not see her husband until he was within the front yard. Something in his limp, or the way he stopped and cut down some of the weeds in the path with his hickory stick warned her. She put down her knitting and set her chair a-rocking as he began to mount the porch steps humming a tuneless air.

Martha Hickman was a tall, middle-aged woman with aristocratic features and whimsical brown eyes. Her dark hair, streaked with grey, was parted down the middle into two unbecoming plaits over her ears, and in spite of the heat she still wore a plain black dress with a collar hiding her long neck. As she watched her husband making heavy weather of the steps with his lame leg, she thought: "The poor dear fool, here he comes I expect with one of his cock-and-bull stories, and expects me to believe him. He's been drinking again and yet he knows it's poison for his gout." She sighed wearily. "Was there every any one more unreliable? What can you do with a man like that—and what would he do without some one to look after him? Poor dear Isaiah."

It was not until the captain had reached the top step that he caught sight of his wife through the mosquito screen. He gave a visible start and grinned awkwardly while his foot caught in a loose board.

"Blame me," he exclaimed as though glad to direct her attention away from himself, "these boards sure want fixin'. Looky here, Martha, these steps're plumb unsafe. Can't you have that lazy nigger fix 'em with a nail or two? Sure I might've broke my neck." And realizing how often he had promised he would fix those steps himself—"for

you jest can't trust these good for nothin' niggers with a hammer and nails"—he closed the screen door with a sheepish grin and glanced towards his wife.

"Isaiah," she said in a quiet voice, "you've been at the liquor again."

The captain looked as though a squall had struck him. Then his face puckered in a deprecating smile.

"Aw, now, Martha," he began, "you know I gave it up months ago. You know I wouldn't break my word." The look of injured innocence on his face would have won an angel to his side, an angel, that is, who did not know him quite so well as Martha did. She continued to look at him with a sorrowful expression while his gaze wandered away from her face and travelled along the porch until he was glancing away towards the city.

"Isaiah Hickman," she said at last, "some things I can forgive, but I can never forgive a falsehood."

"Aw, shucks Martha," said the captain, rallying some of his courage, "I han't been drinkin', not really. Why didn't I promise you——"

"You did," she snapped, "and so you needn't shucks me. I know very well when you've had too much to drink."

"Not too much," Captain Hickman shook his head reminiscently. "Not too much. Now looky here, Martha you ain't got me fair and square at all. I've had practic'ly nothing to drink all afternoon. I reckon I got a touch of the sun, that's all, and I had a real lot of business to fix this afternoon."

Martha gave a deep sigh and picked up her knitting again.

"The things I endure would drive another woman into her grave," she exclaimed to no one in particular. "And now he must lie to me."

She picked up her knitting and began to count stitches. Captain Hickman pushed his cap a little farther back and

thoughtfully scratched his head. If there was anything a fellow wanted now to pick him up and help him to explain things to Martha, he thought, it was a good strong glass of corn whisky; but of course she wouldn't allow the stuff in the house, and he daren't risk getting the bottle he kept hidden in his oilskin coat pocket under the stairs. Still, he *would* like a drink, to clear his head and loosen his tongue and tell her about his business with that English doctor fellow and getting Sam Truckee like that, and—well, maybe if he could slip past Martha and make sure she would not watch him open the cupboard under the stairs—

“~~Must~~ you stand there scratching?”

Isaiah forced another deprecating smile at her question and stood in front of her.

“Martha, I’ve fixed the best bit of business to-day you ever heard of. I reckon that’s why I’m all this excited.”

“You’d better sit down, hadn’t you?”

Isaiah sat in the cane chair. He instinctively began to lift his foot on to the rail, but glancing at Martha, thought better of it.

“Yeah, mebbe I’ll feel better in a minute. It’s a long way to walk from the wharf,” he said wiping his neck with his coloured handkerchief.

“And many saloons by the way,” suggested Martha in an undertone, passing stitches along one of her needles.

“Martha dear you ain’t angry with me, are you now? Really now?” Isaiah’s tone was appealing. “When I’ve got a partner for the *Magnolia* and we’re goin’ to have her fitted out like the finest boats on the river and running again mighty soon and makin’ money again? I reckon it’s excitement—not jest one lil’ gin fizz—that’s got me feeling like this. You must see that, Martha.”

His wife put her work down and looked at him with an expression of amusement tinged with disapproval.

“What story is this you’ve got hold of now, Isaiah?”

"Why it ain't no story, Martha my dear," he protested. "I tell you I got a partner now, a real English gentleman." And he sat back in his chair looking triumphant.

"An English gentleman? A partner?" Martha watched him, puzzled. "Isaiah, what *is* the matter with you? Why can't you keep to the truth?"

"Now Martha that ain't the right thing to say to your husband. It ain't right really. Here I been worked off my feet all day fixin' up a partner so's we can have the old *Magnolia* running again, and drove a right smart bargain with Sam Truckee for——"

"Just what *have* you been doing?" demanded Martha, suddenly looking alarmed.

"It's that English doctor I was tellin' you about. Dave Warner brought him aboard the *Magnolia* to look over her, and I could see he was set on buying her from the first——"

"What! You haven't *sold* our *Magnolia*? Oh Isaiah——"

"Take it easy Martha," he advised with a smile, resting his hand on his wife's knee. For a wonder she did not push his hand away. "You needn't worry about the old *Magnolia*, my dear, but you know how things were, with no freights coming in and no money to pay the crew."

She nodded, letting her hands rest in her lap, and a look of sadness crept into her eyes. To her the old *Magnolia Bloom* had been always more than just a steamboat. The *Magnolia* had embodied all their hopes when she married young Hickman in the face of her family's opposition. And to Isaiah his little steamboat had held all the promise of the future when he had taken his tall and elegant bride aboard for the first time. He would never forget the thrill it had given him when he had introduced her to his officers and to the more important of his passengers, knowing how superior she was socially to them all. And when the realization of her husband's shiftless, unreliable, good-natured and easy-going char-

acter was borne upon her, Martha's natural pride had made her stand by him, refusing to return to her home, and she had faced the years of alternate poverty and comparative comfort with a conviction that were it not for her he would give up the struggle and go down to those depths that swallowed men along every waterfront of the Mississippi. Knowing his weakness for drink and the recklessness of his generous nature, she had had nearly twenty years of caring for him while he followed wild new schemes and came back to her with his disappointments. And through all these years, like a faithful family retainer, the *Magnolia Bloom* had been their mainstay. From the trim new steamboat, with glistening brass and spotless upperworks, Martha had watched her turn into the old-fashioned, shabby and neglected-looking craft, with empty dingy cabins and wheezy engines, almost the oldest boat on the river to-day and, though she only guessed it, a joke in the waterfront saloons. And with this air of decay had vanished, one by one, all their dreams of another new boat and then another and another, until the Hickman Line should have been the largest and most luxurious of any of the steamboat lines running to St. Louis and up the Ohio. Old Hickey—poor simple old Isaiah—was no man to turn dreams into reality, to build up a big business.

Martha had never attempted to understand the steam-boating business with its jargon of freights and traffic receipts and cordwood, and tallow and kerosene and oil, and waste and paint and stores, its talk of high water and currents, of tow heads and chutes and sawyers and cross-rips and its stories of famous pilots and their feats; she had left all that to her husband, feeling it was not part of a wife's duties to try to understand a business that was really no concern of women. But now it seemed that things had arrived at such a pass that they would have to take a partner and she knew how deeply

under his feckless exterior he must feel this necessity.

"But what is this Dr. Torrence like?" she asked. "I'm not sure I'd approve of him."

"He's a right smart man and", Isaiah looked impressive, "honest. He's a real English gentleman and he told me he wanted to get right into this steamboatin' business, so—"

"But I thought you said he was a professional man, a doctor?"

"So he is, my dear, but he ain't jest one of these ornery medical fellows that looks at your tongue and feels your pulse and sells you a bottle of physic at half a dollar before you know where you are, like old Dr. Hippam—"

"Now Isaiah, Dr. Hippam's a very kind man."

"Well, this English doctor ain't like that. He says he's always wanted to sail his own ship, and running a steam-boat, he reckons, is the next best thing. Says we ought to know more about mosquiter. Blame it, ef we don't know a sight too much about 'em already in these parts. Never see such a place as this for the critters."

"But do you think you'll *like* having a partner, Isaiah?"

The captain rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

"Well, when the devil drives," he said, "we can't do much choosin'! But Dr. Torrence is a right good fellow. Soon's he saw the writ on my cabin door—"

"*What* writ?"

Isaiah avoided his wife's startled eye.

"Aw, shucks, it's all right now, Martha. I jest hadn't told you about havin' that writ put on her because I allowed it'd worry you."

The look she shot at him was filled with tenderness.

"You see," he continued, "I jest had to do something to stop the creditors seizing the boat. Things han't been goin' too well of late and—well, I didn't want to start you worrin' any." He moved his chair closer and rested his hand on her shoulder, half expecting her to stiffen

and edge away. "I'm sorry Martha. I reckon you never did much good when you married me. I jest been an old fool all my life, and I 'spect I'll jest go on being an old fool till my Maker calls me."

With an instinctive movement she pressed his head against her bosom. Her eyes were misty as she bent over and gently touched the sparse white hair with her lips.

"Don't talk so," she said in a low voice, stroking his head with her cool hand. "I've never regretted what I did, and I shall always be content so long as I have you—and our old *Magnolia*."

For a moment all the tenderness in her good woman's heart flowed out to him, embracing him as though he were the child of her bosom. She understood his helplessness, his need for her comfort and strength, and she felt the warm glow of affection that had slowly taken the place of her original passion for him. A tear began to course down her cheek to the corner of her mouth and when she lifted her hand to brush it away he sat up again and turned to her.

"Martha," he exclaimed, patting her shoulder, "things're going to look up some. We're goin' to have the old boat repainted and fitted out like she never was before. You should hear the ideas this doctor fellow has about elegant furnishings. My, but I reckon he knows what the passengers'll like. It'd take me a week of Sundays to think up some of the ideas he suggested when we were lookin' over the boat. *And* he means business. Dave Warner and me fixed the agreement right there in my cabin and," Isaiah patted his trouser leg triumphantly, "I've got his cheque right here in me pant's pocket!"

Martha smiled at her husband's enthusiasm. What a boy he is, she thought, he's no different now from what he was when I first saw him, standing on the deck of his new boat. He'd just been made captain and he looked just divine, and if I had my time all over again I'd marry him

just the same, the poor dear boy. Dear me I was a foolish girl then, and now I'm getting old I believe I'm still just as foolish and just as fond of him, bless him!

"And I also fixed up another smart bit of business," he added, suddenly recollecting. "I signed on Sam Truckee at *half the usual pilot's wages*. He's agreed to come for a hundred and fifty a month. What d'ye think of that?"

"Why did he do that?" Martha asked, looking suspiciously at her husband.

"Why? Why, I met him in the—down on the waterfront and offered him the job aboard the *Magnolia* and after a little discussing, he takes it. Sam Truckee, he's no ornery pilot, you know——"

"I should say not," agreed Martha crisply. "Isn't he the pilot that put the *Silas G. Kellock* on the sandbar below Island 16 last fall?"

Isaiah looked embarrassed.

"And wasn't Mr. Truckee the pilot", continued Martha, "that got the *Princess* into a blind chute one night so she lay there three days before they could get her out? And didn't he——"

"Aw, shucks Martha," pleaded her husband, "let the pore man have a break. Sam's a first class pilot, only he's been kinda unlucky lately——"

"Very."

"But it ain't his fault. He's a mighty fine pilot. There's nobody knows the river from Orleans up to Memphis better'n Sam Truckee. He knows every tow head and chute and sandbar and——"

"I don't care, Isaiah. The man may be a good pilot when he's not been at the liquor, but Mr. Truckee——"

"Aw, Martha, Sam don't drink! Why I've even known him refuse——"

"Now Isaiah," began Martha in a level voice. "Let us not raise that subject again. It's not for me to employ the pilots for our *Magnolia*, but I do think you could

find a more reliable and better man than Mr. Truckee."

"Not at a hundred and fifty a month," said the captain with satisfaction.

"Wasn't Mr. Truckee out of work when you found him, Isaiah?"

"Well, uh, he wasn't exactly out of work." He hesitated. "You see, he explained to me that his reg'lar boat—she's that Haynes's packet *Texas Queen*—was laid up a few weeks havin' new b'ilers fitted."

"He told you that did he?"

"Sure he did, Martha. You know, my dear, most all the pilots take a little time off now and again so as to larn the river while their own boats are laid up. It's natural, ain't it?"

"I suppose it is," admitted Martha reluctantly. "But I do hope that Mr. Truckee doesn't put our *Magnolia* on to a sandbar like he did the *Kellock*—"

"Shucks, Martha," exclaimed the old man, patting her shoulder, "don't you worry about that any. We're going to have the *Magnolia* running as soon as the painting's finished. I done a good bit of business with Torrence and Truckee. 'Tain't often I do something right smart. You ought to be mighty proud."

Martha gave him an affectionate glance.

"I am. But I'd like to meet this Dr. Torrence. We must invite him over if I can rely on Julie to get a proper dinner. I just want to see if I approve of him."

"Aw you'll like him, Martha, he's a real gentleman. And", Isaiah added with a twinkle, "I reckon he'll wonder how a poor old steamboat man came to marry such a beautiful gal!"

Martha blushed. "You're an old silly talking so to a lady of my age," she laughed in a low voice, and pressing her fingers lightly to his cheeks, kissed the top of his head.

An instant later she sat severely upright in her chair,

fumbling for her knitting, as the house door opened and emitted the bulky form of the coloured maid.

"What is it, Julie?"

Julie stood for a moment noting her mistress's embarrassment, and rolled her eyes. Her thick lips seemed to stretch and stretch in a wide grin, uncovering oddly placed white teeth and pink gums. If anything it made her look even more ugly—for Martha would not have a good-looking servant in the place—and her bulk heaved as she held her sides. The sharp contrast of her coal-black face and arms and her white dress gave her the appearance of a photographic negative.

"Miss Hickum," she began in a thick throaty gurgle, "Ah reckon yo ain't gwine ter git no chicken fer dinner. Dat gud fer nuthin' bwoy of mine he bin tryin' all afternoon ter kotch dat ole hen, an' he ain't ceeded yit! Will y'll have de ham pie dat Ah bin bakin'? Hit sho' is a fust class pie."

And while Martha tried to decide whether the negress was being obstinate and refusing to roast another chicken, or just lazy about plucking one, Julie filled the open door with the suppressed tempestuous laughter that spread from the lungs, shook the belly, rippled her toes and quivered to her finger tips.

Martha sighed and gave up the struggle.

"Very well, Julie. We'll have chicken to-morrow."

CHAPTER IX

THE *Magnolia Bloom* backed out from the double tier of steamboats. As she swung clear her wheels stopped churning the muddy water and she drifted a full minute on the current, her paddles motionless, her tall chimneys belching a cloud of black smoke high into the still air, while she gathered her strength for a "good ready" in the time-honoured way. Then Captain Hickman pulled two of the bell ropes, listened to the bells jingling faintly in the engine-room, and began to turn the spokes of the ten-foot steering wheel as his vessel swung her nose upstream and slowly gathered way.

Without speaking, Roscoe stood behind the captain and watched, through the windows of the *texas*, the waterfront of New Orleans passing like a panorama. If he had been an emotional man he would probably not have been able to control his excitement half so well. He felt like dancing around the upper deck and hugging any one of the passengers who were leaning against the rail; he wanted to run around the entire boat like a little boy, examining everything, and telling any one who would listen: "I'm a Mississippi steamboat owner! Half this boat's mine!" And if any one had asked: "Which half?" he would not have known what to reply. As it was, he enjoyed sharing the atmosphere of the pilot-house, perched on the top deck, with its windows giving a lofty view all around, its plush sofa and chairs and comfortable furniture lending an air of security from the prying eyes of passengers. And the fascinating array of bell ropes, gong handles and levers above the great wheel, whose

upper half only protruded above the floor, was a constant source of interest for him.

He realized that if any one should be really moved right now it was Captain Hickman; for after nearly losing his own beloved boat into the clutches of creditors, here he was commanding her once again on a run to Memphis with a satisfactory cargo of freight and a fair muster of passengers aboard. Yet despite his excitable nature, there was old Hickey calmly holding the boat on a course that almost brushed her starboard wheel sponson against the sterns of the other boats, apparently unmoved by the turn of fortune.

And what a sight those steamboats were! Two miles of them, jammed together with their noses against the quay, they appeared to be waiting only for a signal to push the wharves right back into Canal Street. As the *Magnolia Bloom* swung upstream, parting the yellow current into two lines of muddy froth that spread fanwise from her bow, and leaving in her wake a broad track like churned milk, the five-mile waterfront that bordered the Crescent City slowly unfolded before their eyes. It was high water—several feet below the tops of the levees, but a fair height of flood all the same—and from way up in the pilot-house Roscoe found he could look down into the upper windows of the houses that stood at the bottom of the levees. It reminded him of the view from the carriage windows as the train used to rumble through Blackheath and Greenwich on its way to London Bridge.

When they had brushed past the stern of the last of the steamboats, the tall, angular man in the battered felt hat, with a shaggy goatee on his lantern jaw and a stub of cheroot between yellow teeth, who had been leaning against the Texas door saying not a word, stepped forward and stood beside the captain. Once clear of the waterfront and well out into the river, the captain's responsibility for navigation ceased and the pilot's began.

Captain Hickman relinquished the wheel, puckering his face while his nose seemed to radiate satisfaction.

"There you are, Truckee," he beamed, "now she's yours. First stop Joe Shipley's plantation, and if you can leave less water between her and Cypress Island than we left between us and the stern of the *President*," he winked at Roscoe, "you'll be a first class pilot yet."

Sam Truckee gave no sign of having heard, but kept the *Magnolia*'s nose pointing towards the middle of the river.

"Come on, Torrence," said Hickman as he took up his stick and limped out of the *texas*, "Mr. Truckee's such a goshdarn fine pilot he ain't got no breath left to talk to nobody. Well he knows this old river like the back of his hand and I reckon we made a bargain when we signed him on. How about a gin sling now, jest for lagniappe?"

The captain did not notice the look on Sam Truckee's face as the cigar stub worked its way from one corner of the pilot's mouth to the other and back again.

"If you don't mind, Captain," said Roscoe, "I'd rather stay up here for a while. I'd like to watch a pilot at work."

Old Hickey gave him a heavy wink. "Jest as you like, Torrence. You'll be in good hands," he said from the door, "Mr. Truckee'll be glad to teach you all he knows about any part of the river you like to choose. Jest remind him to give a long pull on the whistle as we pass my house, so's Mrs. Hickman will hear us go by. I reckon that'll sound sweet music to the old lady's ears again, yes sir." He closed the door behind him and Roscoe heard his voice exclaiming: "Well, if it ain't my old friend Josh Walters! Glad to see ye aboard the *Magnolia* again."

For some time Roscoe remained in the *texas* watching the river unfold before the boat's progress. He noticed Sam Truckee was holding her right up the middle of the river, and from his lofty position he was able to look down at the levees on either side with the wide expanse

of sugarcanes stretching beyond them to the dim line of forest in the distance. Here and there he could see a wooden house like the Hickmans' home, set close behind the levee, only its roof and the upper windows in view, while far away, nestling almost in the distant line of forest trees, he saw an occasional stately house with its colonnades and white grandeur dominating the fields of sugar cane and orange groves over which it held feudal sway.

A long-drawn whistle drew Roscoe's attention to another steamboat that had appeared around a bend in the river ahead. Sam Truckee reached for one of the ropes that hung above his head and blew a long answering blast. As the other boat went booming past them on the port side, her great wheels threshing the water into a yellow foam, Roscoe read her name spread around the paddle-box—*BELLE OF THE SOUTH*—and was filled with boyish glee that his own boat—after all he owned half—must look just like that.

Like hundreds of her sisters, the *Magnolia Bloom* followed the architectural tradition of half a century of steamboating on the Mississippi, and since the first paddle-wheel had threshed its waters back in 1811 the changes made in its steamboats had only advanced along the lines of greater size, more speed and sumptuous elegance. Though nearly twenty years old, the *Magnolia* in outward appearance looked the same to the unpractised eye as any other sidewheel steamboat on the river.

Just forward of her ornamented texas or pilot-house, the two thin black chimneys rose side by side, their tops belled out and cut to resemble an opening flower. On the stays between them hung a monogram representing a magnolia flower wrought delicately in iron, while around the top of the texas and along the rails of each of the three decks the amount of ornamental woodwork followed a tradition that was to live so long as Mississippi steamboating was a power in the land.

Amidships on either side the sweep of the paddle-boxes rose almost to the height of the Texas deck with the vessel's name emblazoned around them in the time-honoured fashion, while above this top deck and just abaft the Texas the pulsing heart of the steamer was revealed to the world. Here, on solid iron columns, the two great walking beams slowly rose and fell as at one end they plunged their gleaming rods into the bowels of the engine-room and at the other turned the threshing paddlewheels, while the exertions of the monster were spent into the air through the gasping 'scape pipes in the stern.

Down the middle of the boat, like a sumptuous hall whose end could but dimly be seen, ran the state saloon with its mahogany tables and soft plush sofas, its pendant row of crystal shimmering chandeliers above them, and on each side the doors leading to the separate staterooms. From the soft noiseless carpet with its array of once gleaming cuspidors to the elaborate oil-paintings that graced the panels on the walls, every part of the furnishings seemed to the river dwellers so sumptuous, so crammed with every conceivable luxury, that in comparing it all with their own simple homes up and down the Mississippi Valley they could think of these steam-boats only as floating palaces. Add to this show of elegance several score of gentlemen and ladies determined to make their steamboat travel enjoyable, the boat's complement of officers, clerks, deckhands, cub pilots, engineers, firemen, coloured stewards, bar-tenders, bell boys and the personal attendants of the wealthier travellers, and maybe two hundred tons of mixed freight, and you have the floating concern in which Roscoe had invested just about all the money he possessed.

While the *Magnolia* ploughed her way up the middle of the river, Roscoe made one or two attempts to get into

conversation with the pilot. But Sam Truckee stuck to his job of steering without much conversational ability until the middle watch. Then one of the cub pilots, a youth of twenty or so with a puffy face and an immature ability in chewing and spitting, came into the Texas and took over the wheel.

"Keep her right up the middle, Black," said his superior.

"Right up the *middle*, Mr. Truckee?" Roscoe noticed the surprise on the boy's face.

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Very good, sir."

And with another puzzled glance at the chief pilot, young Black held the *Magnolia* on her course. -

Roscoe was intrigued.

"Pretty strong current now, isn't there?" he asked Truckee, taking the man firmly by the arm.

The pilot shot him a meaning glance and would have turned away. But Roscoe held his grip.

"The flood water's high for this time of year, isn't it, Mr. Truckee?" he continued.

The pilot turned and faced him.

"Yeah, I know it."

"And must be running five or six miles an hour out here now?"

"Nearer seven," said Truckee aggressively.

Roscoe nodded towards the starboard side. Another steamboat was edging close in to the east bank of the river, feeling her way over the shoal water. Roscoe could see the top of the levee passing her as she forged ahead of the *Magnolia*.

"That other boat's got slack water at any rate," he remarked. "She's the *Cotton Queen* isn't she?"

Truckee affected to stare at him in surprise.

"Sure enough she is. She's a fast boat."

"Or do you think her pilot knows the river better?" Roscoe asked blandly.

Truckee looked at him angrily.

"That's shoal water over that sandbar," he exclaimed testily. "He can take risks if he wants to. I'm not going to."

"Well it's comforting to know we shall be safe and sure," said Roscoe significantly, "even if we do stop out here another week."

The pilot turned on his heel without a word and went below, while Roscoe leant on the rail and watched the *Cotton Queen* drawing ahead.

"I wonder what Truckee's game is," he thought.

Then he caught sight of two crinolined young ladies in conversation with Captain Hickman. They were shading themselves under lace-edged parasols and twittering with delight while Captain Hickman pointed out some of the river landmarks as they slowly drew abeam. With the light of devilment flickering in his eye, Roscoe strolled over to the trio.

"Could you please tell me the name of that headland, Captain?" he asked with a broad smile that was not lost on the two girls.

The old man had evidently had a gin sling too many, and Roscoe could see that the presence of two attractive young ladies was having the same unnerving effect on him as it seemed to have on all the men here in the South. Hickey, he thought, looked as though he had found himself within the Pearly Gates and two angels—female angels—were fluttering around trying to pin a laurel wreath on his brow. But the illusion did not prevent him from glaring for a moment at the intruder until he unbent and said:

"Well, Dr. Torrence, if you must know, that's Nonaquam Bluff."

"What a charming name, Captain," said one of the girls in a low voice. "What does it mean?" She was very pretty, Roscoe noticed, in her flower-trimmed bonnet and

little cape, and her round young face was innocent like a rose fresh in the morning dew, though its beauty was marred, he thought critically, by the little pouting mouth. "Spoilt child," he decided professionally.

The other girl was older and plumper, with a strand of fair hair escaping from beneath her bonnet, and he mentally relegated her to the position of travelling companion, but he liked her.

Captain Hickman turned to the prettier girl with alacrity.

"Why, Miss Amelia, that bluff has a very sad story."

Both girls edged forward.

"Oh *do* tell us, Captain. What's the story?"

"Well, miss, it's an old Indian legend." He suddenly recollected Roscoe and turned to him. "You might be interested in this too, Torrence. But let me first introduce you. This is Doctor Torrence, not so long out from England, and these young ladies," he said as though uncovering the finest exhibit at a show, "are the daughter and niece of my oldest and most trusted friend, Colonel Fayette. Miss Amelia Fayette," he indicated the younger and prettier girl with a faintly exaggerated wave of the hand, "and Miss Florence—uh—Kilner. The two young ladies are in my charge, and I'm more than honoured, sir, to have them as my guests aboard this boat."

Roscoe bowed and said in his most English manner:

"I'm charmed to meet you both, Miss Fayette. Miss Kilner."

The pretty Amelia Fayette dimpled.

"Now isn't it cute meeting an Englishman right here on your boat, Captain?" she simpered in her musical voice, dropping her eyes. "I always reckon it must be just *too* wonderful to be a doctor and be able to see folks as they are. Don't you, Dr. Torrence?"

"Well—" began Roscoe dubiously, but the girl continued without a pause.

"You know I just can't wait till we make the Grand Tour next spring to see your country, Dr. Torrence. Cousin Flo and I are just too interested in anything English, aren't we, Flo?"

The elder girl nodded, and Roscoe saw how animated her face became when she smiled. Florence Kilner was clearly overshadowed and overawed by her vivacious cousin.

"And so we want to see as much of England as we can," the younger girl continued. "Do you come from London, Dr. Torrence?"

"My practice was in London," Roscoe answered, "but my home was near Sittingbourne, in Kent."

"Is that near London? I just love the old buildings in London, don't you?"

"Do you think we might be able to see the dear queen?" asked Florence. "I'd adore that."

"Could we go inside Buckingham Palace," asked Amelia, "if we took an introduction from Senator Davis?"

"Well, I don't see why not," began Roscoe, but Captain Hickman coughed and interrupted him. "Don't you-all want to hear the legend of Nonaquam Bluff?" he asked almost pathetically.

Amelia gave a musical little laugh and laid her hand on the old man's arm.

"Oh, it's too bad of us," she exclaimed, her brown eyes twinkling. "But you know, once Flo and I get on to the subject of England we can't stop. Now *do* tell us the legend, Captain."

Old Hickey looked down at the roguish little face and beamed.

"Well it's a sad story," he said. "It was like this. Long ago there was an Indian maiden of the Sioux tribe called Nonaquam. She was very fair and lovely, and she loved a young brave called Blazing Arrow. But her parents were cruel and hard, and they threatened to marry her to an

old chief called—a chief—why, bless me if I can't remember what he was called."

The old man scratched his head, pushing back his peaked cap over one eye.

"Wily Fox," suggested Roscoe innocently.

"Maybe it was," agreed the captain, clutching at a straw.

"Are you *sure* of that?" asked Amelia with an impish glance. "It seems a pretty cute name to me."

"Yes, it was Wily Fox, the Buffalo Killer," Roscoe's grave manner was almost impressive.

"Aw, looky here, Torrence, where d'you get that from?" the captain demanded. "Do you know this story?"

"You go ahead," replied Roscoe, "I was only being helpful on the details."

The two girls tittered.

"Whatever his name was," resumed the old man setting his cap straight and striking his story-telling attitude, "Nonaquam, the lovely innocent young girl did not want him. She was betrothed to—to—"

"Flying Arrow," breathed Roscoe.

"*Blazing Arrow*," corrected Amelia, her eyes dancing. "Do go on, Captain."

"Thank you, Miss. Blazing Arrow. So she called her parents and told them that if she had to marry this chief—the one she hated—she would only do so if the marriage ceremony was performed right on the top of that bluff that you see over there."

While they all looked across the water at the steep brown cliff that was slowly passing astern, Roscoe said:

"As you see, Nonaquam was a determined young lady."

"History don't tell us that," admitted the captain. "But looky here, Torrence, I reckon you must know this legend."

Roscoe grinned. "All right. I'll finish it. This is not quite like the general run of Indian legends," he went on,

turning to the girls without even a flicker in his eyes. "Our worthy captain omitted to say that Nonaquam was not only beautiful but she was also a pretty strong and muscular young lady, and when the day arrived and her parents and old Wily Fox and others assembled on that bluff, Nonaquam stood up and confessed that she didn't love Wily Fox. She was betrothed to another, and declared that if she could not marry him in her own way——" He paused, and both girls asked: "Oh, did she throw herself off?"

Roscoe held up his hand.

"I told you Nonaquam was a strong young woman," he said gravely. "She pushed her parents and old Wily Fox off the bluff, and as soon as the echoes of their arrival on the beach below died away, she ran down the hillside straight into the arms of her lover and went straight off and married him."

The captain looked outraged while Amelia and her cousin appeared puzzled. Then the younger girl broke into a ripple of laughter.

"Oh Dr. Torrence, how *could* you!" she laughed. "I reckon that's the cutest lil' story I've ever heard, but surely you've gotten the legend all wrong? Didn't Nonaquam throw *herself* off?"

Roscoe put his head back and broke into a hearty roar of laughter that made several passengers turn and look at the group.

"I like that version best," he said when he had recovered his breath. "It's an improvement on the captain's story."

But a sudden roar from the old man startled them.

"Why bless my pants!" he exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss. And you, Miss Florence. You must excuse me a minute, but what in heaven's name's that goshdarn pilot reckon he's thinking of?"

Startled out of their laughter the two girls watched the

irate figure of the captain limping up to the pilot-house, his stick stubbing on the deck, while Roscoe noticed Amelia's underlip stand out like a little girl's when she is going to cry.

"Why has the captain left us so rudely?" she demanded, looking up at Roscoe.

"Something to do with his duties," the latter explained. "And I'll have to go along with him."

Amelia pouted.

"But you can't leave two females unattended like that up on this deck, Dr. Torrence." She looked like a child to whom nobody had ever yet said no.

"I'm sorry, Miss Fayette," he said firmly, "but where the safety of passengers is concerned we just have to do our duty," and with his tongue in his cheek he moved off towards the door of the wheelhouse.

"I've just noticed it," wailed the old man as Roscoe caught him up. "Goshdarn my pants, why didn't I notice it before? Look at that thar blasted *Cotton Queen* aboomin' up there in the slack water and here we're hittin' the whole flood!"

He burst into the texas. Young Black turned around startled by the sudden entry.

"What you think you're up to, huggin' the middle like this?" the captain demanded.

"It's the p-pilot's orders, sir," stuttered the youth.

"What d'you mean, pilot's orders? Look where you're heading her!"

"It's Mr. Truckee's orders, sir. He said to keep her right up the middle, and so I'm——"

"Mr. Truckee's orders be damned," exploded the old man. "Where's Mr. Truckee? Gone below has he? Well tell him I want to see him. Right here and now!"

The boy rang one of the bells and in a moment or two the texas attendant appeared. At sight of his friendly black face the captain exploded again.

"Aw don't stand there grinning. I'll go find Mr. Truckee myself," he shouted and, slamming the door behind him, tripped over his stick and lumbered to the deck.

Mr. Truckee appeared as Roscoe was helping the old man to his feet.

"Looky here, Mr. Truckee," spluttered the captain, still short of breath from his fall, "what's all this about keeping us plumb in the middle of the channel all the time? That cub in there says they were your orders."

"So they were, Cap'n." Sam Truckee's mouth closed like a trap as they all three entered the pilot-house again.

"Why—why—but what's the idea?" Hickman began to bluster. "We'll be a week o' Sundays busting ourselves against the current like this. Look at the *Cotton Queen*. Look how she's gone ahead now, and we had her by an hour from New Orleans. Gosh darn it, don't you know I'd give an eye to beat that damned packet every trip?"

"Well, I ain't taking chances thus run," said Truckee.

Captain Hickman's eyes popped and his chins worked.

"But blame it, man," he wailed, banging his stick on the deck, "what's the matter with you? You know this river, don't you?"

"Sure I know it. Every foot this side of Memphis," agreed Truckee indifferently.

"Well, why in heck aren't we using the shoal water like the *Cotton Queen*?"

"Because while I'm pilot on this boat," explained Truckee, "I'll keep her to the channels."

Captain Hickman gazed around helplessly, and the sight of the *Cotton Queen* now little more than a speck with a cloud of smoke above it far ahead against the east bank of the river was too much for him.

"Get away from that wheel," he shouted and pushed the scared cub pilot to one side. Then he turned the spokes as though they were each too hot to hold. The

Magnolia began to swing to starboard while Truckee, leaning against the side of the pilot-house, chewed his cigar with a sardonic smile. The air in that pilot-house became more and more electric as the captain continued to break one of the chief rules of the river, when the pilot and not the captain is in charge.

Closing in towards the shore with the fierce current drifting them broadside down, Old Hickey caught sight of a snag under his starboard bow. It was a big tree showing a few feet above the surface and leaving a furrow of broken froth as the current poured past its dead limbs.

The captain pulled the larboard bell for "Slow".

"Lend a hand, Torrence," he called, "hard over."

Neither Truckee nor the cub pilot moved. Roscoe jumped forward and between them he and the captain spun the wheel and watched the boat straighten up. With her larboard paddlewheel eased down and the starboard wheel threshing at full speed, she came around and cleared the snag by a few yards. Then the captain rang "Come ahead" on the bells.

They were close to the shore now, somewhere about in the track of the *Cotton Queen*. The captain looked anxiously around at the hurrying flood waters. Beneath their yellow surface he knew there lurked below the next headland hidden dangers in sandbars, sunken tow heads, half-revealed snags or sawyers, tortuous channels and treacherous cross currents. Now that his rage had had time to cool under the silent gaze of the pilot and the strain of taking the wheel, he began to feel worse than uneasy. The crime of asserting his own authority over that of his pilot's began to filter into his distressed consciousness.

Sam Truckee continued to lean and chew in silence, and his cub was copying him, uncertain what might happen next. Dragged in to play a part in this serio-comedy, Roscoe wanted to lean against the wheel and roar with laughter, but a glance ahead stopped him.

"There's another snag right ahead," he exclaimed dragging the wheel towards his side. But the captain leapt at the spokes and began to climb up them with surprising agility. Once again the course of the boat began to follow the letter S while the captain and Roscoe alternately dragged at the spokes and Truckee and his cub leant back and chewed derisively.

"What in heck are you doin'?" shouted Old Hickey, almost puce with excitement. "Fetch her over to starb'd!"

"Not on your life," said Roscoe grimly, "look at that snag there. You can do what you like with your half of the boat. *My* half's coming over to larboard," and he wrenched the wheel over.

"Shucks, that ain't a snag," breathed old Hickey with relief. "It's a floating log, that's all. Can't you tell the difference?"

But for all his relief, the captain's face was bathed in perspiration and he had to wipe the sweat from his eyes in order to see. Then he turned to Truckee.

"Now you take her and keep her to the shoal water."

Sam Truckee shook his head.

"Not me, Cap'n. I ain't taking any chances this trip." He grinned maliciously. "Look at that water ahead there. That's a sandbar you're putting her on to."

The captain jumped for the bell ropes and nearly dragged them off their brackets.

"Set her back on both. Give her all you've got!" he shouted down the tube, and while the bells were still jangling in the engine-room the paddles began to thresh astern. Roscoe felt the boat quiver suddenly and saw the staff on her stem rise a foot in the air, while a tremor ran through the hull. Old Hickey's face was such a picture of rage and fright, indignation struggling with contrition, that Roscoe had to walk out of the atmosphere in the *texas* so that he could shake with laughter in the open. The paddlewheels were threshing the hurrying water,

but as yet the steamboat showed no sign of sliding off. Several of the passengers were leaning over the rails, watching the boiling water pass the hull.

A hand touched his arm and he turned to look down into Amelia's face. Florence was behind her.

"What's happening, Dr. Torrence? Is it serious?"

"We've just run on to a sandbar," Roscoe explained.

Amelia's eyes opened wide. She turned to her cousin and gasped. "Oh Flo, oh, we're *wrecked!*" And before he knew what was happening she reeled back into his arms, her eyes closed and her body limp.

Roscoe caught Florence's eye and smiled knowingly while two or three passengers gathered around them.

"Go and get that fire bucket," Roscoe directed one of them while he still held the girl. "This young lady's swooned—more or less," he added in an undertone, watching her eyelids. The colour had not left her cheeks and once he saw her eyelashes flutter. She felt warm and soft in his arms, but something, some little imp in his mind, hardened him against a show of sympathy.

One of the men brought the wooden bucket and held it for him. With a faintly grim smile playing around the corners of his mouth Roscoe dipped his hand in the water and sprayed it over Amelia's face. She opened her eyes with a start. Another flick of cold water made her leap out of his arms and stand facing him.

"Oh, oh!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot.

"Oh, oh!" he mimicked her, grinning.

The colour mounted to her cheeks and she looked supremely pretty with her eyes flashing as she gasped: "How could you treat a lady so!"

Roscoe looked at her with a mischievous expression, keeping a tight grip on her arm.

"Next time you swoon", he said, so that none of the others could hear, "choose some man who's not a doctor —unless you learn to swoon better, my child."

Amelia gave him one look of hatred, and with flushed cheeks she gathered her skirts about her and walked aft with her chin in the air. Roscoe caught Florence's eye again with an understanding smile as two of the more gallant male passengers assisted her cousin below, then he returned to the *texas*.

"That little minx needs a good slapping," he thought, "and for two pins I'd give it her."

The *Magnolia* was moving now as the flood water washed away the sand from under her forefoot, and the captain rang the bells again for half speed ahead on both engines. The boat slowly stopped drifting down on the current and began to creep ahead once more. Then he turned to Truckee and almost pleaded:

"Won't you take her now, Mr. Truckee? You're pilot."

"Oh, is that so, Cap'n?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I only wanted you to hug the shoal water and miss the current out there."

"Maybe, Cap'n, but I reckon I jest can't afford to run risks in here. Not on *ha'f pay*."

Captain Hickman glanced helplessly at Roscoe and acknowledged defeat.

"Looky here," he said at last, "let the cub take her up while we all three go along to my cabin and talk this over."

And when the pilot's fees were adjusted to Sam Truckee's satisfaction, the *Magnolia* began to forge ahead through the intricate shoals and chutes that only a trained pilot could know.

CHAPTER X

THE tide of fortune seemed at last to have turned for the old steamboat and her owners. In the first three trips up to Memphis she began to carry more freight than she had loaded in twenty years. There was more freight to be had, for one thing, for trade was increasing up and down the valley of the Mississippi after the set-back following the yellow-fever epidemic in New Orleans in '53. As towns swelled in size and new hamlets sprang up along the banks of the great river, so there appeared more passengers waiting at the landings, more plantations to send their crops down to New Orleans, more travelling than ever by steamboat.

With his customary forcefulness Roscoe threw his energies into "making a go" of this steamboating venture. This role of steamboat owner was such a change for him that he enjoyed an almost boyish enthusiasm that brought fresh ideas to the venture. With the same impatience that had harassed the nurses and annoyed the surgeons in his hospital days, he now sailed over the orthodox methods by which passengers and freights were obtained for the boats. First of all he had given up his room at the "Palmetto" and, with Uncle Ben as his constant waiter, had taken up quarters in one of the *Magnolia's* staterooms. Enjoying a life afloat that he now knew was what he had always wanted, Roscoe devised many schemes for bringing the attractions of the old *Magnolia* to the notice of the public and the freight shippers.

"Look here," he told David Warner, while they leaned over the rail on the hurricane deck and watched the vessel

unloading at the New Orleans wharves, "we've got to get this little packet better known. Lines like the Express and the Anchor and Willard's boats don't need pushing because they're so deucedly popular already. But a small steamboat like this, that calls at landings the bigger boats won't look at, and drops people or half a ton of freight off at their own plantations to suit anybody's convenience offers ten times the facilities to these new settlers up and down the river. The big express boats are no good to them. And show me the boats that cover our run—even if it is a bank crawl—as well as we do."

"Well, there's Mark Sayer's *Cotton Queen* and another boat runs up the Red," suggested Warner. "I'd say he's out to get all the short freight business. They tell me he's going to buy another boat."

"To hell with Sayers and his boats," exclaimed Roscoe, banging the rail with his fist, "if he can afford to buy another packet, we'll have to manage it too after a few more trips. But we've got to run to capacity. Here's my idea to advertise the boat, and this is where you can do your part—as agent."

He drew from his pocket some sheets on which he had been busy all the morning.

"Here", he continued, as though addressing a hospital nurse, "is a series of small announcements to be put into the advertisement columns of the *Times-Democrat* and in the main papers at Natchez, Vicksburg and Memphis. They're perhaps a little out of the ordinary as steamboat announcements go, but that's just how I want them to appear. There's also this bill here that I've drawn up I want you to have printed—that's only a rough sketch of the *Magnolia* at the top, but the printer should be able to get us a woodcut—and have these bills pasted up around New Orleans in the best positions we can get, not just on the boards reserved for the steamboat bills."

"But what's this you say?" asked Warner as he ran his

eye over the roughly drawn sheet. "New, Elegant Furnishings in Sumptuous Style: Trained Servants for Lady Passengers: First Class Orchestra from the Opera House,—my God, Torrence, what opera house?"

Roscoe grinned.

"And," Warner continued, fascinated, "Sumptuous Cuisine by Celebrated French Chef: What on earth——?"

"Yes," Roscoe admitted, taking the bill from the agent, "perhaps I'd better not say sumptuous twice like that."

Warner pulled the lobe of his ear with a curious glance at Roscoe.

"But what I want to know is what *is* all this about a Covent Garden orchestra and a French chef?"

Roscoe pursed his lips while he pencilled in a fresh word.

"Oh, simply that people nowadays want something more than just being carried to their destination. They want *attractions* aboard these boats, diversions and interests in addition to the bar and the poker parties, something their womenfolk can appreciate. The days when plush furnishings and plenty of gilt and electroplate caused a stir and captains of steamboats could pick and choose their freights and reserve their cabins for only a few chosen passengers and families, are over now, Warner. There's too much damn competition on this river nowadays and if you ask me, these railroads are going to make us steamboat owners feel the draught. Only last trip, coming down close inshore past Greenville, Mississippi, I saw a gang of negroes grading a stretch of land ready for a new railroad to Yazoo City and Vicksburg. It won't be long before the plantation owners start sending their cotton by rail to New Orleans."

Warner pursed his lips, shaking his head.

"I don't anticipate much competition for the river boats there," he said with assurance. "I can't see the plantation owners taking their families in the cars so long as the boats are more comfortable."

"That's just it, Warner, we've got to keep the boats more attractive and comfortable than the trains. There now," he asked, holding out the bill, "how's that? 'New Furnishings in a Style of Royal Elegance'."

"My God."

"Don't you like it?"

"Fine phraseology, Torrence. Fine. I was only thinking of the furnishings, that's all."

"Well, damn it, they're all right in lamp light," Roscoe said airily. "And we keep the shutters down when the sun shines. Look at all the new mirrors I've had put in—at two dollars twenty apiece, too—two in every blessed cabin so a lady can see how she looks behind."

"Most of 'em look best that way, too."

"Unfortunately, yes. But you know how a woman wants to see for herself what her hair is like at the back—especially now these ringlets have come in again."

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about women, Torrence."

"Maybe a little too much," Roscoe admitted ruefully. "But then it's a medical man's privilege—or duty. But I do know how much depends on the woman's wishes. You've been a shipping agent in Orleans here for several years, haven't you, Warner? You've fixed freights with planters and merchants and engineers and lumber firms, and arranged passages for their families and servants and horses and slaves and what not for a long time, haven't you? Now has it ever occurred to you that frequently the person who really decides what boat they're going on—the passengers I mean—and whereabouts in that boat, and what price stateroom, is your client's lady? It's the woman, my friend, the dear quiet little wife that makes up your client's mind and lets him think he's chosen the boat and the cabin location just to please her. And I'm going along on this theory that if we attract the wives and daughters aboard the *Magnolia* with pretty furnishings

and lights and mirrors and tea parties and pianoforte solos in the afternoons, they'll bring us more trade than all the advertising in the world. I'd hire Jenny Lind herself to sing to the passengers if I thought we could get hold of her for a trip."

"But why the celebrated French chef? How can you afford his wages?"

Roscoe gave Warner a sly look.

"Monsieur what's-his-name is certainly celebrated in one town that he had to leave in a hurry," he said "and I found him glad to take a job like that, even in the *Magnolia's* galley, at any wage. And a real French chef, my friend, is an attraction to passengers of both sexes. Now", he added, handing Warner the last sheets of paper in his hand, "we can't afford to pay for every single bill-head and announcement in the advertisement columns, and we have to keep this little packet's name in front of the public, so that she gets talked about. We can't put up any records like the *Telegraph* or the *William Tell* and so appear on the front page of the news, because speed is not our chief feature," and he gave a wry smile. "But I've given you there half a dozen little stories about the *Magnolia* and her career, a few words about 'Brave Captain Hickman' and some items of interest about innovations we're trying aboard. I want you to get these stories to the editors of the various papers up and down the river where we're going to call. See the idea?"

Warner glanced through the first of the paragraphs and laughed.

"Why on earth you became a doctor beats me," he exclaimed. "You ought to have been a showman."

"Oh, but I'm quite a good doctor," Roscoe protested trying to look pained, but his mouth widened into a grin. "Anyway, I think my ideas will work, and it's fine fun."

And work they did. Within a month the *Magnolia* had

become one of the most discussed boats on the lower Mississippi. Wherever she went there seemed to be something that reminded the editor of the local paper of a story about her, and with her advanced age already exaggerated she soon became something of a legend. Exploits of her lame captain, who was shown up in the light of a crippled hero bravely fighting unfair competition, appeared in the news columns of more than one riverside newspaper, and the *Magnolia* always had a habit of calling at that very landing within a day or two. She had a peculiar three-note chord whistle that every one had come to know. Somehow or other there had appeared a story about that in the Vicksburg *Courier* which had fired the imaginations of hundreds of river dwellers—a legend how one night in a storm of wind and rain and lightning one of the earliest steamboats (no one was certain of her name) had run down past Vicksburg bluffs and in the turmoil of darkness following a whole series of blinding flashes had struck a rocky ledge and “killed herself”. Before she sank, however, the peculiar haunting notes of her whistle had brought a north-bound steamboat to her rescue and every soul aboard was taken off and safely landed; every one, that is, except the captain and the pilot. The story went on that it was this whistle, which had saved so many lives on that night back in the early ’40’s, that Captain Hickman had acquired and fitted to the *Magnolia*. That a story should appear in print was quite enough for the majority of readers to believe it utterly, and from then on loungers at the riverside towns and landings used to listen for the *Magnolia*’s strange cry with a certain belief in the super-natural. It seemed as though the notes of her whistle haunted the lower reaches of the Valley.

It was all very effective in focusing people’s interest in the old boat, and the results in passengers and freights soon began to prove that there were more ways than one

of attracting business to a Mississippi steamboat. But what helped to draw public attention most towards Roscoe's venture was the rivalry between the *Magnolia* and Sayers's boat *Cotton Queen*.

Roscoe had not met Mark Sayers, but he knew him to be a hard man where business was concerned and as soon as the *Magnolia* had started to capture the short-run business, calling at any landing where even the smallest freight was to be handled, Sayers became determined to keep the business to himself and freeze out "Old Hickey's coffin", as he called the rival boat. It happened more than once that the *Magnolia* and the *Cotton Queen* left New Orleans together, and their race to make Natchez first would be followed with keen interest up and down the waterfront. There was something more homely, almost more personal, in this fierce racing between two of the smaller boats than in those great races staged for the big steamboats, because they were both New Orleans packets and their respective owners, captains, pilots and officers were all well known in the city. Along the wharves, in all the saloons, therefore, bets ran nearly as high when the *Cotton Queen* and the *Magnolia* stepped upstream together as when the much advertised race between the *Natchez* and the *Indian Chief* was run.

It was at the beginning of the fall when the late autumn rains up north had come gushing down, filling the waters almost to the tops of the levees, that the *Magnolia* started to back out from Mitchell's woodyard a few miles above Natchez. Her boiler deck was piled with cordwood, and in the glow of the open furnace doors negro firemen were stacking the logs for easy handling. High into the air above them the tall stacks were belching sparks like blood-red stars in a mad universe, and the heat from the fire glistened on their bodies as they worked. The sun was setting in a lurid glow that shot yellow fingers up into the

sky from behind a jagged bank of clouds, and the surface of the river was tinged with an unhealthy colour that promised bad weather. All evening black clouds had been banking up in the sky to the westward over the low-lying Louisiana shore, piling up their sombre masses like phantom heads rising in a nightmare, and the air was still and sultry, heavy with the oppressiveness of thunder. Between the little landing where a handful of passengers had come aboard and the western shore a mile distant, the great river flowed smooth and serene, like a panther on the prowl.

Roscoe leant on the rail listening to the thresh of the paddles while the steamboat gathered way, and watched the slowly changing scene. During his trips in the *Magnolia* he had seen the river in many of its phases, and each had seemed to him more fascinating than the last. As he had begun to learn its grandeur, the immensity of this father of waters, and to follow some of the difficulties of piloting a boat up its tortuous channels, so he had begun to appreciate the peculiar beauty that lay in the Valley. Never before had he watched such sunsets as those that sometimes turned the turgid waters into a sea of fire; never had he seen such nights as those when the moon speckled the surface of the river and revealed the other shore as a dark line like wind at sea approaching over the horizon, when the unwinking stars looked down like the solemn eyes of gods.

He remembered how at home the sun, setting beyond the faraway pall of London, could glint over the green Kentish fields, touching the smudge of smoke from the cement works at Chatham with gold, and yet leave the distant hills beyond Sittingbourne their aura of purple that he knew so well. He could remember the startling colouring of the Thames estuary on a bright morning when a fresh nor'wester was blowing and golden, puffy clouds raced across an azure sky, and white crests flashed in the

sandy green of the sea where russet-sailed spritsail barges tacked to windward like hawks at play. He recalled days when a sou'west snorter brought a driving rain from down Channel, across the moist Kentish fields, and a fleet of collier brigs, newly arrived from the Tyne, tacked and cross-tacked under the lee of Sheppy, their apple bows throwing up clouds of spray and their topsails reefed and iron taut in the gale. He thought of the beach along the Sheppy shore where he had spent his holidays as a boy, picking up weird little shells and hearing the cries of the gulls as they wheeled and soared on the wind. And sometimes he sighed for the bright colouring of a Kentish morning, and the green quietness of the leafy lanes, the freshness of the countryside, the tranquillity that was England. Yet his life had changed so much, his interests had been let loose into so many fresh channels, that he had little time now to feel sad for home. With eyes trained to observe and the heart of a poet struggling deep within his cynical exterior, he saw beauty and grandeur in this yellow torrent that poured mile wide between muddy shores two thousand miles to the Gulf, while the little *Magnolia* picked her way upstream with a line of waves, like creases on the still surface, spreading out from her bow and a trail of muddy froth hissing in her wake. By morning, if nothing held her up during the night, he reckoned she would be at Vicksburg-under-the-Bluff, tied up to one of the busy landings.

Roscoe watched the sun disappear and the river fade to a sombre grey, and he sniffed the air as though its oppressiveness could be smelt. Then he turned and strolled into the pilot-house.

"Gon' to be a storm to-night," remarked Sam Truckee from his position at the wheel.

"The storms are pretty bad in the Valley at this time of year aren't they?" Roscoe asked, to make conversation.

"It certainly looks as though it's gathering in the west for a good one."

"Yeah, maybe it'll be a good one."

Truckee kept his eyes on the bow flagstaff and eased the spokes over a shade.

"Will you run all night, Mr. Truckee?" asked Roscoe.

The pilot turned to spit neatly into a cuspidor and said: "Well, I reckon I know this stretch like the back of my hand, and with high water like this I figure I can search the slack water over that tow head you can see yonder. Yes, sir. If this yer storm don't play like hell let loose I reckon I'll run all night."

"But if a storm gets very bad at night," Roscoe pursued his thoughts aloud, "I suppose steamboats have to tie up till it gives over?"

Truckee chewed slowly before replying.

"Depends where you are and what you're doin'," he said without turning. "If you're comin' down, why you can just keep a booming along midstream. But if you're goin' up, like we're doin' now, and you got a tricky crossing, it'd need a mighty smart pilot to keep his boat at it when he can't see three foot in front of his face—'cept when the lightning flashes. Yes, sir."

Roscoe watched him fingering the spokes, holding the wheel steady sometimes with his foot in a spoke near floor level. There was an easy nonchalance in the man's attitude, in the way he turned to hit the cuspidor with hundred-per-cent accuracy, and the easy tilt of his hat, as though he didn't give a damn where he was steering nor where the boat was going. But from his experience of the man Roscoe recognized that there were few more competent pilots on the river than Sam Truckee when he was not being mulish.

"So you won't tie up for this storm, however bad it may be," he suggested.

"Well, if we get through the next ten miles and pass

Stack Island *afore* this storm breaks," Truckee told him, "I'll keep her at it. But if it breaks real bad when we enter the next chute but one, abreast of Old Squaw Point, I reckon we'll tie up. This next bit's a mighty tricky stretch of river. I remember the night—dark as the inside of a hog it was and raining hard—that the old *Texas Belle* killed herself on a tow head just below Old Squaw Point. Ed. Spillman was her pilot, and a first class man he was, but they said how he was worried about his wife that night. She was at home, mighty sick and he didn't have his usual skill. I reckon that's the way it was. You'll see the wreck if it ain't too dark by the time we make the chute."

"I've watched you shooting runs and crossing sandbars and taking the ship into what looked to me in the darkness like a solid wall of rock," remarked Roscoe, "but I still don't know how you find your way up the river at night."

Truckee shifted the plug of tobacco to the other cheek.

"Well, sir, it's like this," he said in an indulgent tone. "You see that ar smooth water stretchin' right away there to the starb'd shore?"

"Yes."

"And you know that smooth water is gen'ly good water—deep, that is?"

"Yes."

"And you'd take this yer steamboat right plumb up that ar channel till you arrived against the other shore?"

"Er—yes."

"Now looky here." Truckee took Roscoe's arm and pointed. "Do you see that little streak of ripples across the channel there?"

"Yes. That's a breeze on the water, isn't it?"

"Nope. That shows a tow head. A sunken sand spit that was an island up to two years ago. It runs right out there from the shore." The pilot gave his attention back

to the wheel and turned the spokes. "If you took her up your chute, you'd pile her up on that ar head as sure as mules ain't hosses."

Roscoe shrugged his shoulders.

"Then where can we go? That's shoal water over to larboard, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't," agreed Truckee with annoying nonchalance. "I reckon we'll slide her over and see. What you think looks like broken water running over a sandbar ain't nuthin' but the stream from the chute over there meetin' the run from the main river coming around the next bend. You see."

He turned the wheel until the *Magnolia* headed straight for the dangerous-looking water. In a few minutes the bows thrust themselves into the swirls and Roscoe involuntarily held his breath. But the boat's head only took a sudden sheer to port, Truckee checked her with a rapid spin of the wheel spokes, and in a few seconds they were running in the smooth water beyond.

"So you see," he went on in his calm voice, "that was nothin' more'n a meeting of the waters, and I happen to know there wasn't less'n six feet beneath our keel. No, sir. But how far would you carry on in here?"

Roscoe peered through the pilot-house windows. The sun had gone and the last rays were fading in the sky like watercolours left in the rain. The boat was heading close in towards a steep bluff where the silent trees overhung the water. It seemed impossible to make out where their own dark reflection ended and the bank began, for it looked like a solid wall of blackness to his untrained eye. They seemed very close, rushing in at twelve knots.

"I'd swing her out now," he said.

Truckee chuckled.

"Why, we're more'n a quarter mile off the bank yet," he said, "and there's deep water right in under those trees."

They went on and on, heading, it seemed to Roscoe, straight into a wall of rock. But still the paddles threshed the turgid surface, and the trees did not fall on them.

"You see that oak there with the twisted branch?"

Roscoe screwed his eyes at the bank.

"Yes, I see it now."

"Notice that patch of white under the bank there? It's a rock—Creole Stone, it's called. Well, you keep that bit of rock just open of that ar oak, like we're doin' now, and you hold her on it till you bring 'em in line. Now, just take a look astern."

Roscoe obediently looked out through the door along the deck towards the *Magnolia*'s wake. The light was rapidly failing and it was several seconds before his eyes could make out the western shore. A glimmer in the far distance showed where a house nestled amongst the trees.

"You see a snag sticking out of the river there, maybe a quarter mile astern?" Truckee let go the wheel a moment and pointed. Against the gathering gloom Roscoe could just discern something darker than the rest standing a little to one side of the steamboat's wake. "As soon as you get that snag in line with that clump of trees to the left of the light there, you swing her over into the deep channel. Here goes."

Almost with the trees overhanging her decks and her starboard paddlewheel in danger, it seemed, of touching the caving bank, the *Magnolia* straightened up and followed the inky line of the shore. The echoes of her paddle beats came back like the sound of broken cavalry, and the steady breathing from her 'scape pipes sounded eerie and sinister in the stillness.

It was so dark now that Roscoe could no longer distinguish the trees from the smooth water itself. Yet Truckee continued happily to con the boat up through the chute and then, in a wide sweep, across the river to find slack water once more against the Louisiana shore.

"Well, I give it up," exclaimed Roscoe at last as he lit a cigar. "I used to think the Mississippi was so big you just had to steer right up the middle till you got to your destination."

"So you do", Truckee shot at him, "when you're coming down. Then you come booming down the middle like a queen that's mad with her courtiers. But if you want to save time and your fuel you got to search the slack water and creep up over the shoals and close in around the tow heads, working the eddies. And ev'ry trip I make up here some of the channels have altered, and we pilots have got to learn that and remember for next time. It don't do to trust to providence with a steamboat drawin' near seven foot. I allow providence ain't gotten a lead line, anyways."

He broke off to spit expertly into the cuspidor.

"You rec'lect how far we got when we didn't find the slack water that fust trip?" he asked, giving Roscoe a knowing glance. "Jest shows how a pilot earns his wages, don't it?"

Roscoe nodded.

"But why doesn't the government or some river body put lights to lead through the deep water channels," he asked with sudden inspiration. "Wouldn't it make it so much easier for piloting?"

Truckee looked at him with a withering scorn.

"Lights? What use would lights be? Haven't I jest said some of these yer channels change every trip? A light put up one day might simply lead right plumb across a shaol the next. Then where'd you be?"

"But an association of pilots, say, could keep watch on the places that are likely to change, and shift the position of the beacons."

"Sure they might," agreed Truckee with a hollow laugh, "and they could have pilots in skiffs to help us steamboat pilots through the trickier chutes. Hell, there

wouldn't be anything *to* pilotin' then, mister. You'll kill the noblest profession in the United States and the captains themselves would prob'lly begin tryin' to do without pilots aboard. Lights!" he added, spitting with annoyance. "So long as I got a pair of eyes and know every chute and run and bar on this river south of Memphis, I don't want no lights. No, sir!"

Then his eye caught something astern and he stiffened.

"Well, well," he exclaimed, in a drawl, "jest look who's boomin' along astern of us!"

Glancing astern Roscoe could see a red glow reflected in their wake. Then a shower of sparks drew a glowing curve in the darkness, revealing the chimneys of a steam-boat. She appeared to be cutting across the river half a mile below them, and so far as he could make out, was coming up on them fast.

"Know who she is?" asked Truckee. "She's the *Cotton Queen*. She's goin' to try to make Vicksburg afore us and snatch that lumber contract. Yeah, I allow that's her game."

As he spoke the first peal of thunder rumbled outside the pilot-house, and raindrops began to patter on the roof. A vivid flash of lightning disclosed the pursuing steamboat coming along with a white bone in her teeth and black smoke belching from her stacks, and in the blackness that followed the air was rent with another crash of thunder that racketed and split across the heavens, rumbling and growling away down river.

Sam Truckee looked back at the red maw of the *Queen's* furnaces.

"I allow that goddam son of a hick reckons he's goin' to pass me before we get to the Narrows," he said in a low voice. "Well, he's wrong. And what's more, if he figures on bustin' along in this storm right up through Dead Injun chute, well—I'm gonna show him the way, storm or no blasted storm."

He stood chewing quietly for a few moments, spat through the corner of his mouth and turned back to the wheel. Then he gave one of the bell ropes two tugs and put his mouth to the speaking tube. "Tell the boys to give her all you've got, Mac. Never mind the fuel bill just now. The *Queen's* on our tail." He turned to Roscoe. "Better tell the Cap'n we'll run all night—so long as that son of a hick does."

Roscoe found Captain Hickman at the desk in his cabin. The old man swung around in his chair and opened his eyes as wide as they could go gazing up at Roscoe over the rims of his spectacles when he heard of the race that was on.

"What? What's that? That goshdarn rattle-bellying old sidewheeler chasin' us?" he exclaimed struggling to rise and reach for his stick. "By God, Torrence, we jest got to make Vicksburg first this trip."

A crash of thunder almost drowned his next words. Roscoe could hear it booming and grumbling away above the rhythmic thud and surge of the engines.

"What's Mr. Truckee goin' to do about this storm?" the old man demanded as he pocketed his spectacles and limped out into the passageway.

"You needn't worry, Captain," Roscoe reassured him. "Sam Truckee's honour seems to be at stake. He's going busting up the river through hell let loose if the *Queen* keeps going too." He glanced sideways and noticed the pride in Old Hickey's face. .

"My, but that's fine," exclaimed the captain. Then he stopped and held Roscoe by the sleeve of his coat. "Didn't I tell you Sam Truckee was jest the grandest pilot ever steered a boat south of Memphis, huh? Didn't I?"

At the door leading on to the Texas deck they paused before running the gauntlet of the storm to the pilot-house. A lashing rain was driving on to the deck with a

roar like a waterfall and crash after crash of thunder rent the air, echoing and re-echoing down the Valley and sighing away into the far distance. Standing almost spell-bound at the open door Roscoe watched the steely-blue lightning flashes flick across the heavens, picking out the *Magnolia*'s belching smokestacks and the stays between the flagstaffs and ventilators, the darkened pilot-house and the great bell on its pedestal forward, like a picture etched in frozen colours on the memory. The wind had risen in a violent squall, screaming against the door. The rain, driving almost horizontally, swept into the passage-way in a flurry of wetness. Beneath them they could hear the inky waves breaking and crashing against the weather bow, and already, so quickly had a sea got up, the old *Magnolia* was rolling like a ship at sea. Throughout her flimsy structure she complained of the treatment: doors swung open and banged, windows and shutters clattered and rattled, and above all the other noises, the partitions and bulkheads and floors and furniture creaked and groaned and gasped with pain.

"By God, Torrence, old Mac's driving his engines," said Captain Hickman, clutching Roscoe's arm. "Listen to 'em."

Roscoe nodded. The heavy thud of the paddles reverberated throughout the ship, faster, more imperiously than he had ever heard them before. He felt sure the entire vessel was throbbing and shaking under their impact and the surge of the waves, from her flat keel to the serrated tops of her smokestacks.

A heavier sea than usual thundered against the low bow and crashed over the foredeck, blowing to leeward in a cloud of spume that glistened coldly in a flash of lightning. Above the tremendous crash of thunder that followed, Old Hickey shouted into Roscoe's ear:

"My, we'll be washing that freight off the b'iler deck if we drive her like this!"

Then he loosed his grip on Roscoe's arm and staggered out into the storm. Another flash lit up the scene with its brilliance, and for one instant Roscoe could see the old man, bent to the wind and rain, limping towards the Texas door, while beyond him to leeward the seas raced away towards the Mississippi shore, their backs flecked with a white tracery work like lace on the water.

A moment later he and the captain were in the shelter of the pilot-house where the glow of Truckee's cigar was the only light showing, and the slim figure of the cub pilot standing by him was but a silhouette against the darkness outside. The steamboat was carrying no navigation lights to-night, and at the pilot's orders tarpaulins had been stretched across the forward end of the boiler deck to hide any glow from the furnaces. On a night like this the pilot and the lookout in the bows must have not a glimmer to blind the eyesight. With flood water coming down from way up the Ohio, there might be tree trunks and logs and all manner of wreckage racing down in mid-stream, any of which, hit end on by the knife-like bow, could burst in the planking and flood the ship. And the Lord knew whether there were any lumber rafts running down, like small islands of logs, with not a single light showing and not a man of their crews on the lookout for steamboats. Roscoe had come to realize that sand spits had sunken tow heads, snags and half-submerged trees, channels that silted up or changed their course, and sand-bars that rose in a day and became islands within a week, were not the only hazards of piloting a steamboat at night. Like a vast sinister monster, Old Man Mississippi always had one more surprise up his sleeve when you thought you had learned all his tricks.

"Mister, you ain't goin' to let that Mark Sayers rattle-trap get past you, are you?"

Captain Hickman's question was delivered in a high querulous voice from out the darkness of the pilot-house.

The glowing end of Truckee's cigar swung round a half-circle.

"Cap'n Hickman," his voice said slowly, "I'll keep your old packet ahead of that goddam boat if old Mac has to sit a nigger on each one of the safety valves!"

A vivid flash filled the streaming windows and silhouetted the three men standing there: the pilot, his long legs braced apart and his hands clasped behind his back; his assistant, the cub, braced against the wheel, his young hands knotted around the spokes, straining to keep the wheel from kicking; Roscoe with one hand in his pocket, leaning against the side of the pilot-house and Old Hickey, short, square and upright, with his cap on the back of his head, standing in the middle of the floor, resting one hand on his stick and slowly rubbing the back of the other against the end of his nose.

A sudden cry from the lookout rang out from forward.

Truckee and the cub dragged the spokes around as though they were scrambling up an old-time treadmill. Roscoe felt the deck heel beneath his feet until he had to hold the window frame to prevent himself from slipping. A sea hit the weather bow with a dull crash and a sheet of spray clattered sharply against the Texas windows, causing the great bell outside to give one deep, reverberating note.

In the blinding light of the next flash they saw the stern of a big scow slipping past them a few feet from the *Magnolia*'s side, a man now waving a lighted lantern on her deck, hollering and shaking his fist at the steamboat. Truckee opened the window and exploded at the figure.

"You goddam son of a squaw, what the hell d'you mean abustin' down mid-channel like that without a light, huh? If I'd a seen you I'd a run you down, you black-faced bastard and sent you to hell if they'd have you there! Go chase yourself and get outer the channel or for

Christ's sake keep a light aburnin'. Get goin', blast you, and drown yourself right now!"

With which and a triumphant smile, though he knew the scow hand could not have heard any more of his own speech than he could of the man's, he slammed the window shut and returned to the business of piloting.

Spellbound by the grandeur of the storm Roscoe watched the almost continuous lightning flashes lighting up the river astern. As the electricity flickered across the sky, leaving an impression on his mind of a vivid map of the Amazon river that lasted almost up to the next flash, he could see the waste of waters tumbling and heaving below him, while over the dark line of the shore to leeward the trees bent and roared, their leaves grey where the wind bent them back.

Then he watched the other boat steadily. With no lights showing and with her own furnaces also shaded by tarpaulins, she came along like a phantom through the night; hidden one moment in the blackness of the storm, rain swept and buffeted by the wind; then brilliantly silhouetted against the raging waters like a toy boat in a pond as a vivid flash revealed every detail of her, from the white cloud of steam from her 'scape pipes beaten down by the wind, to the tracery work of her stays and deck rails. Then a shower of red sparks would pour out of one of the stacks and fly away to leeward like a fiery dragon in a Chinese fairy-tale.

"The *Cotton Queen's* gaining on us," Roscoe remarked, still watching her.

The figure of Old Hickey started in the darkness.

"W-what's that? She's catching up? Mr. Truckee, d'ye hear that? The *Queen's*—"

"I know it." The pilot's voice was slow and calm. "The *Queen* can give this old crate a knot and a half and still walk around her—"

"By God she can't," the captain exploded. "The

Magnolia's passed that belly thumpin' old scrap heap——”

“BUT—I was goin' to add,” pursued Truckee, evenly, “but—I'm figuring on havin' enough water through Dead Injun chute to cut him off and maybe put a mile or more between us. I'm making across to it right now.”

“My,” exclaimed Old Hickey in admiration, “now you're talking!”

Through the window aft Roscoe could see the white bulk of the *Cotton Queen* drawing away from their quarter as they sheered across the current; and by the time the *Magnolia* straightened up to head up stream once more, the other boat had drawn abeam way over to starboard.

Truckee pulled another of the bell ropes and opened one of the windows on the lee side of the pilot-house.

“I won't have any more talkin' now,” he said, autocrat of his own domain. “I've rung for the leadsmen and I got to hear what they get.”

Above the roar of the wind, the wash of the seas thirty feet below, and the crash and crackle of thunder, the occupants of the Texas could hear faintly the cries of the leadsmen rising and falling as they called out their soundings.

“And a half—three. . . . And a quarter three. . . . By the mark three. . . . Quarter less three. . . . Quarter less three. . . .”

The voices went on musically, faint and fleeting on the wind, like the echoless laughter of sprites.

Roscoe listened intently, for it seemed that with every change in the soundings called the men altered the tone of their cries. Each call seemed to be made on three notes, forming a chord, and the notes for “A quarter *less* three” were different from the chord sung out for “And a *half* three”. Soon it occurred to him that a trained ear like Truckee's, could tell the sounding called from the way it was sung.

Standing near the door, it seemed at first to him that

no one was paying any attention to the leadmen's voices. Although both he and the captain were silent, Truckee was speaking to his young assistant in low tones, and neither seemed to be listening to the men's voices.

"And a half—twain. And a quarter—twain."

The notes had changed again, a minor chord now. The wind shook the wheelhouse and the rain streamed down the windows. The lightning was passing towards the south now lighting up the trees on the Louisiana shore and appearing almost to sizzle over the wave crests, while there was a little longer pause now before the thunder crashed and the artillery answered down the river.

"And a quarter—twain. MARK TWAIN!"

At the sudden rise of the leadman's voice, Truckee came to life. Rasping: "Hold her to it, a point more to starb'd" to the boy, he gave three jerks on a bell rope and leant out of the window to peer ahead into the gloom. Roscoe felt the engines slow their measured beat.

For a moment there was a deathly stillness in the wheelhouse that made the noise of the elements outside all the more impressive.

"Quarter less twain. . . . *And a half—one!*"

Roscoe held his breath. A fathom and a half—nine feet—and shoaling. And he knew they were drawing just under eight with the present cargo. Truckee was trying a dangerous experiment, hoping to get his steamboat through this treacherous Dead Injun chute, trusting solely to the state of high water. He knew there could not be more than a foot now under her keel, that the paddlewheels must be pulling up two great crested seas out there in the darkness, seas that would be yellow with the silt of shallow water, and he knew the cub was finding it difficult to keep the old lady on her course with the sand and water clinging along her bottom and boiling madly against her rudder. The boy had to fight to hold the big wheel while the sweat ran down his face and stung his eyes. . . .

A sudden tremor ran upward through the ship. Truckee's face darted back from the window.

"Hard a starb'd," he snapped. Then into the speaking-tube he called: "Mac, give her all you've got on the larb'd engine."

Roscoe felt the sudden thresh of the port paddlewheel while the tremors shook the deck under his feet.

The captain edged over to Roscoe.

"Don't look like there's enough water here," he whispered. "I thought he was cutting it fine."

The boy held the spokes of the wheel steady while they tried to shake themselves out of his grip.

"She won't come around, sir," he said, in an apologetic voice.

His chief grunted.

"Hold her to it," he said, calmly, "she's working across the bar and there's maybe a foot more water this side the chute."

The paddlewheels continued to pound and the old vessel shook and vibrated from end to end, while through the regular shakings of her engines one could feel another tremor running up under one's feet—less distinct now than it was, but still perceptible as the keel dragged and bumped over the muddy bottom.

"Gosh my pants, if he ain't gettin' her over!" exclaimed Old Hickey in a hoarse whisper, nudging Roscoe's arm. "Didn't I tell you Sam Truckee's the most God almighty, first class, high flyin' pilot that ever——"

The tremors suddenly ceased. The leadsmen's voices continued their chant:

"Quarter less—twain. . . . Mark twain. . . . And a quarter—twain. . . ."

"Straighten her up and hold her there," said Truckee crisply as he rang the bells for full speed.

Captain Hickman clapped the pilot on the shoulder.

"By gosh, Sam," he exclaimed, beaming, "she's over!

What d'ye think of that, huh, Roscoe? That's what I call pilotin'."

"I can't make it out," Truckee complained, half to himself. "I allowed I'd get mark twain in that cut off. It's either silted up since I came down last trip or else the river's dropped a couple of feet. But I jest can't make it out. And what's more," he added, addressing the captain, "gettin' picked up like that's put us back on the *Queen*. Look at her."

Through the driving rain they could see the dim glow of the other boat's stern light, well away up river!

Old Hickey groaned.

"Shucks, if that ain't too bad, Sam," he said in a lugubrious voice, "but I reckon you all did your best, you and the Cub there, cuttin' across the bar like that. Gosh darn my pants if that warn't the prettiest bit of piloting I've seen for many a day. But looky here Sam," he added brightening, "we ain't agoin' to let that old boat of Sayers's learn us the way up this river, gosh darn me if we ain't. It's a long piece to Vicksburg yet and if the old *Magnolia* don't show that belly scratchin' old rattle-trap the way up to the landing to-morrow morning, I'll—I'll buy a plantation and quit the river!"

Roscoe was vexed he could not watch Old Hickey's face in the darkness of the pilot-house. He was certain it was a study just then.

"And what's more," added the captain with his hand on the door knob, "you can tell Mac to give her every ounce he's got so long as he's got wood for the fires."

"O.K. Captain," Truckee grinned in the darkness. "At this rate I allow either the b'ilers will go up or a cylinder head blow off, but I doubt if the wood'll last all the way to Vicksburg," and he nodded towards the smokestacks standing like giant pipes each side of the pilot-house windows. Roscoe was amazed to see that the base of both

of the chimneys was glowing a dull red from the heat of the fires below.

"Then, by heck," cried Old Hickey, brandishing his stick, "tell Mac to pull down the bulkheads, burn the saloon furniture—anything so long as we can chase that psalm smitin' rye swillin' old bastard and beat his blasted boat to Vicksburg!" With which the old man slammed the Texas door and hobbled along the deck back to his cabin.

The storm had passed away down river leaving a sky from which clusters of stars twinkled through rifts in the clouds. The lightning was still flickering occasionally in the steamboat's wake, but it was by now far away and seconds elapsed after each flash before the thunder rumbled and rolled away over the distant Louisiana shore. The wind had died away and a stillness seemed to have laid a gentle cloak upon the wide expanse of darkly flowing water, through which the two steamboats forced their way like giants swimming breathlessly. Nearly a mile ahead of the *Magnolia* the *Cotton Queen* stormed along through the night, a pall of smoke rising against the stars from her two smokestacks and an occasional shower of sparks descending on her decks like a red rain.

All night long the old *Magnolia* shook and shuddered to the hurried poundings of her paddlewheels and the surge and scend of her engines. Word had soon got round the passengers that there was a race on with another steamboat, and although certain ladies were apprehensive lest the boilers should blow up and others complained of the awful creaking in their cabins, the menfolk stayed up late laying odds in the bar as to which boat would make Vicksburg first by midday.

In his own little stateroom Roscoe found sleep hard to capture for he was close to one of the paddleboxes and the end of the escape pipe was not many feet away from

his window. What with the thudding of the paddles, the continuous crash of water carried around with the great wheel, and the measured gasping of steam from the pipe, the general shaking of the floor and the creaking of the cabin walls was but a minor addition to a medley of sounds. He was excited, too, about the outcome of this race—the first real, on the level race they had so far had with the *Cotton Queen*. He knew that if they could make Vicksburg before the Sayers's packet this time, not only would the *Magnolia*'s prestige and popularity go up, but they stood every chance of securing a very good contract for freighting for a big lumber concern near the city.

When Uncle Ben put his grey head cautiously around the door early that morning he found Roscoe sitting up.

"Is yo' awake, Mas'r Ross?" asked the old man needlessly. "Ah hopes yo' slep' well, suh."

"Course I didn't," he lied, "not a damn wink. But, whereabouts is the *Cotton Queen*, Ben?"

Ben's eyes rolled in his black face.

"Ah ain't bin on deck, Mas'r Rossm fo' to see. But Ah brung yo' some hot cawfee, suh."

Roscoe stretched and yawned. "What's the time, Ben?"

"Ah doan' rightly know, Mas'r Ross, but de sun he ain't up yit."

Roscoe lifted one of the slats of the window shutter and focused his eyes on the scenery. An early morning calm lay on the river, and between them and the misty line of the shore nearly a mile away a sea of greyish-yellow water flowed past, silent and peaceful. A grey light was spreading across the sky in the east as day tiptoed to the top of the distant hills, and a solitary buzzard flew past his vision like the last phantom of night, a lone black shape reflected on the mirror-like surface of the water.

In contrast to the silence and stillness of the dawn the *Magnolia* still shook and rattled as she pounded up river, and from voices that he could hear from outside his

window, Roscoe guessed some of the male passengers were already astir, watching the race. Pushing up the shutters he put his head out of the window and breathed in the cool morning air. He was now able to look along the deck towards the bow and what he saw there made him spring back and knock the cup and saucer out of Uncle Ben's hand.

"By God, Ben, what d'you think?" Roscoe declared, oblivious of the hot coffee soaking his sleeve and on to the bunk, "we've overhauled the *Queen* and she's right off our bow here. We'll be level with her soon. Here, give me my shirt. I'm going on deck."

On the hurricane deck near the bow he found a group of men leaning on the rail watching the other boat. The *Queen* was farther away than he had at first thought, perhaps a quarter of a mile, but the distance between the two boats had been greatly reduced during the night, and excitement amongst the passengers was growing as the bets increased.

With her paddles threshing the muddy river into foam that rose in a series of white-crested waves racing away from her stern, the *Queen* looked a noble sight. White plumes of steam pulsating from her 'scape pipes leaped up to mingle with the cloud of black smoke that billowed from her tall stacks, while the shadow of this cloud lay on the water between the boats like a dark carpet. As in the *Magnolia*, some of the *Queen*'s passengers were already astir at this early hour, leaning against the rails at the after end of their decks, discussing in groups the relative chances of the two rivals.

Roscoe climbed the stairs to the upper deck and looked into the wheelhouse, but Mr. Truckee was not on duty. The second cub pilot had charge of the wheel and he was giving his whole attention to the wheel. The air had a damp chill about it and after standing on the top of one of the paddleboxes for a while, watching the *Queen*,

Roscoe turned to go below for breakfast. As he did so the lanky figure of the pilot came up the companion stairs.

"Morning, Mr. Truckee," Roscoe greeted him. "We've made a bit on the other boat, I see."

Truckee paused with his hands in his pockets and his felt hat pushed over his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, slowly nodding as he watched the other boat. "We've overhauled her quite a piece this last two hours. But jest how long *this* old crate'll hold together at this rate I can't say. Either the engines'll drop through her bottom, or the b'ilers go up or—" he turned his face upward and looked at the tops of the chimneys, "or maybe one of these yer stacks'll fall overside."

Roscoe followed the pilot's gaze and watched how all the funnel stays were shaking while the smoke poured out from the convolvulus tops in a dense cloud.

"Old Mac's bin cussin' about his cordwood," Truckee remarked, biting off a chew of tobacco. "Says it ain't goin' to last. Told him the cap'n said to burn the furniture."

"What did the engineer say?" asked Roscoe.

Truckee's face broke into a grin.

"Said he'd like to see Old Hickey's face if he did bust up the saloon tables for the furnaces. The Old Man treats everything in this old boat like it was a family heirloom. I heard through the steward Mac's a bit skeered of his main bearin's. The old *Magnolia*'s never bin run as hard as this in her life before, I reckon, and she don't like it. I wonder if they're having any trouble aboard the *Queen*—"

He stopped with his mouth open. In the corner of his eye Roscoe saw what he took to be the *Queen*'s two smokestacks lifting together into the air. An instant later a mushroom-shaped mound of smoke enveloped the for-

ward half of her hull, and a deep, sharp roar shook the *Magnolia's* decks.

"My God," exclaimed Torrence in awed tones, "her boilers have gone up!" As he spoke the water around the stricken steamboat was speckled by falling debris.

Almost immediately, as the cloud of smoke and steam began to lift, flames shot up here and there amongst the wreckage. The *Queen's* paddlewheels had stopped turning, and already with a list to port she was slewing around, turning her shattered fore end towards the *Magnolia*.

Roscoe could hear the screams of her passengers as they swarmed out of the cabin doorways, crowding along the decks towards the stern, away from the hungry flames. Truckee had already run into the pilot-house and pushed the amazed cub away from the wheel. Tugging at the engine-room bells he had the *Magnolia's* wheels stopped.

"Christ," he exclaimed, glancing aft. "This current'll take the *Queen* on to that sunken tow head before we can get her people off if we ain't smart."

The mate was already on the foredeck. Truckee leant out of his window and bawled down to him.

"Jake! Have your men stand by the for'd stage. I'm goin' alongside the *Queen's* stern!"

With deliberate hands Truckee rang the bells again and turned the wheel spokes while the *Magnolia's* bow slowly edged in towards the sinking steamboat.

CHAPTER XI

WITH her bow stage, like a medieval drawbridge, lowered to the level of the other steamboat's main deck and her paddlewheels turning slowly, the *Magnolia Bloom* began to hold the sinking vessel against the current. At once a rush of dazed passengers and wild-eyed negroes had begun across the stage, tumbling thankfully on to the *Magnolia's* decks, while behind them more and more crowded aft, away from the fire that now leapt above the *Cotton Queen's* wheelhouse.

Without a trace of excitement on his face and with his little black eyes half closed, Captain Hickman stood in the wheelhouse giving directions in a low voice, while Sam Truckee held the wheel and chewed in silence. Old Hickey had hurried into the texas without thinking of his stick, and he now walked over to the open window without remembering his lameness.

Already the *Cotton Queen's* own boat had been launched and was being pushed off from her side, filled to the gunwales with passengers. But a group of frantic negro men and women had been marooned on the steamboat's fore-deck. They seemed to cringe from the crackling flames, huddling together behind bales of freight, and when some of them lifted their hands and looked up towards heaven, Roscoe saw that some were shackled together. Something seemed to contract within him as he thought of the trader who had bought them escaping with his own skin and leaving his human freight to the mercy of the gods. Captain Hickman had noticed the helpless group too, and

leaning out of the Texas window he called down to the mate:

"Have the yawl overside, mister, and get those niggers off of the boiler deck there."

A pall of smoke shot with tongues of deep red was billowing up high into the still morning air in a great arc, casting its reflection in the surface of the river like a thundercloud. In a few minutes, it seemed, the forward half of the *Cotton Queen*, nearly as far aft as the paddle-boxes, was blazing and crackling as the lightly built cabins caught and burst into flames like tinder. Some of the crew were working desperately with pickaxes at the shattered woodwork, tearing the broken boards away with their hands, while from within came piteous cries for help.

Hurrying to his cabin for bandages and lint Roscoe found Uncle Ben standing by his bunk passing a corner of the sheet from one hand to the other and back again, with his eyes fixed vacantly on the shuttered window.

Roscoe glanced curiously at him as he opened his medicine drawer.

"What's eating you, Ben? Trying to remember something?"

The old negro started and dropped the sheet.

"Oh Mas'r Ross," he exclaimed, suddenly clutching Roscoe's arm, "hit suah is good fo' to see you's safe. 'Deed Ah did'n know wheah in all creation you bin all dis time. Ah reckoned when de *Cotton Queen* 'sploded her b'ilers, maybe de ole *Magnolia* would go and bust herse'f up too, jest so's she could show de ribber folks what a *real* b'iler 'splosion look lak. Ah been 'spectin' de b'ilers to go up ev'ry minute, an' Ah was dat skeered 'cos Ah said Ah reckon Mas'r Ross is a-settin' right theh in dat Texas house just right over dem b'ilers, an' when she go up, lawks-a-mussy Mas'r Ross'll suah go higher nor all de angels."

Roscoe could not help smiling as he hurriedly stuffed a roll of bandages in his pocket. Uncle Ben watched him with growing concern.

"Wheah you gwine wid dem banjes, Mas'r Ross?"

"There're some injured aboard the other boat, Ben. Now out of my way, I'm in a hurry."

"You ain't gwine aboard dat *Cotton Queen*, Mas'r Ross." Uncle Ben looking unexpectedly determined, moved to the doorway of the little cabin, and faced his master. "You ain't gwine a run right into de jaws of def lak dat. No, suh." And he held Roscoe back with a gentle, but powerful hand.

Roscoe felt his temper rising. It never was very deep so early in the morning.

"Confound you, Ben," he exclaimed pushing his arm out of the way, "you let me pass. What the hell d'you mean by behaving like this? Out of the way."

"Mas'r Ross, dere ain't nobody else gwine aboard dat boat is dere?"

"No, you old fool, but there're women and children there injured and it's my duty——"

"Ah reckon *sensible* folks doan' go abwoard a steam-boat what's sinkum. 'Sides, maybe she got a nudder b'ilier dat's jest gwine to 'plode any minute now. All de *sensible* folks is a leavin' her right now. Ah reckon you better stay right heah, Mas'r Ross——"

"And leave those people to burn to death? Listen, Ben, if you don't move out of that doorway and let me pass——"

Something in Roscoe's expression warned the old man and he stepped aside. But for another moment he held Roscoe's sleeve and Roscoe was surprised to notice his eyes glistened with tears.

"Mas'r Ross," he said in a low voice, "you's all Ah got. Der ain't nobody else cares what happens to pore ole Uncle Ben. An' ef de Lawd done tuk you, honey, Ah

reckon Ah'd ruther be tuk along too. Cain't Ah come wid you? Maybe Ah c'n tak care of you."

Roscoe hesitated taken aback by the old man's sincerity; then embarrassment overcame him and he exclaimed "Oh come on then," impatiently, and hurried along to the foredeck with Uncle Ben at his heels.

There were still a few more passengers and some of the crew coming aboard over the stage and Roscoe had to elbow his way through them. A young woman with a shawl thrown over her nightdress was being helped aboard by an older woman and a man. She was carrying a child in her arms and looking straight ahead with vacant eyes. As she passed Roscoe heard her crying, "Oh Lord Jesus. Oh Lord Jesus. Oh Lord Jesus." But he had no time to comfort her.

Once aboard the *Cotton Queen* he hurried forward to where some of the crew had been cutting away the shattered woodwork. A pall of smoke and steam filled the saloon where chairs had been overturned, pictures had fallen from the walls and lay broken and trampled on over the ruckled carpet, and a chandelier had crashed on to the central table scattering its candles and globes in a riot of white wax and twinkling glass.

Roscoe pushed his way into one wrecked cabin after another, but found them all deserted, while Uncle Ben padded after him, rolling his eyes and trembling with fright. The deep roar of the fire came to them through the engine-room bulkhead and the heat seemed to grow more oppressive every moment.

"Nobody about here," remarked Roscoe in a voice that sounded too casual and had a hollow echo in the deserted saloon.

Uncle Ben turned in his tracks:

"N-no, suh, Ah reckon we bettuh go back," he muttered looking fearfully about him, but Roscoe waved him on.

The wreckage forward was appalling. They came to what was left of the barber's saloon, with one of the walls and half the floor gone, and the gruesome sight that met their eyes made Uncle Ben shake like an aspen leaf. A man was evidently being shaved when the explosion took place and his body was still in the chair. His head had gone and the white sheet that covered his shoulders was clotted with blood. The body of the barber was pressed against the shattered woodwork, and one glance was enough to tell Roscoe that the man was dead. Smoke was pouring from a corner of the floor and Roscoe could see that in a few minutes the whole place would be ablaze.

With his lips compressed he led the way into the next row of cabins, stepping over pieces of plank and pushing wreckage aside to get past. Behind him Uncle Ben followed fearfully, but his eyes were rolling from side to side and his hands trembling so much that he could scarcely take hold of any part of the wreckage. The roar and crackle of the flames was perceptibly nearer, and a sudden crash of falling timbers brought a puff of smoke along the passage that made Roscoe choke.

"Doesn't seem to be anybody left," he said, between fits of coughing. "Anybody alive at any rate."

Uncle Ben suddenly seized his arm, trembling worse than ever.

"W-what was dat, Mas'r Ross?"

Roscoe listened. Only the crackle of flames and the deep note of the fire could be heard.

"Nothing. You're just imagining things, Ben. Come along."

"N-no, suh. 'Deed Ah heered v'ices." The old negro looked around him with such wildly bulging eyes that Roscoe laughed aloud. But the noise choked in his throat, for its echoes sounded so grim, so hellish that he could have sworn that a devilish cackle answered him from the end of the passageway.

Uncle Ben gave another start, and his face suddenly went a sickly shade of grey. Never before had Roscoe seen a negro blanch so much with mortal terror.

"Dere 'tis again, Mas'r Ross," he gulped, seizing Roscoe's arm with a shaking hand. "Hit's—hit's v'ices!"

Roscoe listened carefully and now heard a faint moan.

"Hit's a hant, Mas'r Ross." Uncle Ben's jaw was shaking so he could scarcely say the words. Suddenly he clasped his hands together and began to pray. "Oh Lawd ha' mercy 'pon us. Oh Jesus, he'p us git outer dis yer boat. We's jes' pore miserable sinners an' dey's—"

"Shut up, you old fool," exclaimed Roscoe impatiently. "It's some one crying for help. Help me find them."

The stifled groans seemed to come from behind a thin bulkhead in an adjoining cabin. Part of the passage wall had fallen against the door and who ever was in there alive was imprisoned.

Roscoe shook Uncle Ben's shoulder.

"Find an axe or piece of iron, anything," he exclaimed, "that'll do to break down the partition."

Uncle Ben searched the saloon and came back with part of a chandelier. It was the best he could do and Roscoe swung the heavy bronze against the panelling. Fortunately it was thin and the partition split and began to give way. A few more blows drove in the panel, and with Ben helping he kicked away enough of the woodwork to crawl through.

Inside he found a small stateroom that must have taken some of the blast of the explosion. One side had been blown in, the bed overturned, and the contents of the chest of drawers and a wide open carpet bag strewn all over the place.

A man was lying there with his legs pinned under the wreckage, slowly twisting his head from side to side. He had on only a pair of trousers and a torn undervest as though he had been dressing at the moment of the

explosion. A glance at the raw flesh of his left shoulder and arm told Roscoe that he had been badly scalded.

"Help me get this wreckage off his legs," he ordered Ben. "Careful now."

Uncle Ben looked at the man's face and suddenly dropped on one knee beside him.

"Mas'r Quillum! Fo' land's sake ef hit ain't Mas'r Quillum!"

Roscoe stared.

"You know who it is, Ben?"

Uncle Ben's face twisted into a grin as he nodded.

"Suah Ah do, Mas'r Ross. Dis yer's Mas'r Quillum. When Mas'r Thébaut an' Missie Lucette done visit de Lawmah Plantation, Ah done went wid 'em. Mas'r Quillum, suh, doan' you know ole Uncle Ben? Uncle Ben'll look aftuh you, suh. You jest tak' it easy now. Uncle Ben'll git you right outa heah."

But the injured man only opened pain-wracked eyes for a moment without recognizing the old black face.

"We'll have to get him out of here quickly," Roscoe remarked, "there's no time to attend to him now. Look." And he pointed to spirals of smoke that were already finding their way through the bulkhead. The crackling of the flames seemed to have become more menacing, and the heat in the small cabin was rapidly growing intolerable.

As though all his previous fears had evaporated Uncle Ben became a tower of strength. He lifted the mass of wreckage from "Mas'r Quillum's" leg unaided while Roscoe gently moved the injured man clear.

"His leg's broken," remarked Roscoe. "We shall have to be careful."

As he spoke there was a sharp crackling of timber, a rumble and a searing crash. Part of the bulkhead suddenly caved in and a heavy charred beam, red with little spouting flames, fell through the aperture into the cabin.

Roscoe and Ben instinctively sprang back, while smoke

filled the place and billowed through the wreckage. The fire's roar was suddenly increased, as though a door had been opened upon its fury, and tongues of flames began licking the frail woodwork above their heads.

Roscoe dashed the sweat from his eyes.

"Come on, Ben," he shouted. "We've got to get him out of here."

He threw his weight against the woodwork in the doorway. At first it resisted him, but when Ben added his powerful hands to the onslaught the planks cracked and began to splinter, and laboriously they tore them apart until the passageway was clear.

Coughing and choking in the smoke Roscoe returned to the injured man.

"Take him gently, under the arms," he said, "I'll take his legs."

With infinite care they carried him out of the heat of that cabin and through the saloon where the smoke was already pouring in from one of the stateroom doors. The man groaned once or twice, and then fell limp as consciousness left him, and they took him out on to the after deck where they laid him gently on one of the seats.

Roscoe stood up amazed.

"My God! Old Hickey's backed away from us!" he exclaimed. "The old fool must have thought there was nobody left aboard this boat."

Sure enough there was the *Magnolia Bloom* a quarter mile away with a broad track of soapy wake leading back from her where her paddles had churned the water.

Roscoe left Uncle Ben tending to his old master's friend and ran up the companionway to the hurricane deck. A light breeze had risen now and the smoke was being brought along the deck in choking whorls. As he ran aft he thought he felt the deck quiver beneath him, and a second later the *Cotton Queen* began to slew around and list over to starboard. A glance over the side showed him

the yellow water rushing past the hull, piling up on one side of her and gurgling around her stern like a muddy mill race.

"Hell," he exclaimed as the full significance of the situation dawned on him, "we've struck a sandbar and now the *Magnolia* can't get alongside anyway."

Then he cupped his hands and hailed her.

"Mag-nol-ia, AHOY!"

From his position on the upper deck he could see the passengers lining the *Magnolia*'s decks, and even make out the figures of Sam Truckee and Old Hickey and one of the cub pilots in the wheelhouse. But it didn't seem as though his voice carried that far. He took a deep breath and hailed again, wishing he knew how these river folk did hail steamboats. As he did so a shower of sparks shot up into the air and rained down on to the after deck. Twice he had to brush burning ash from his shoulders. It would not be long before the *Cotton Queen*, like the dry wooden crate she was, caught alight from end to end, and visions of what the old *Atlanta* had looked like as she blazed came to him now with startling clarity.

He hailed again, standing on the rail and waving his arms. And still the *Magnolia* continued to forge ahead against the current, the beat of her paddle floats and the regular gasping of her 'scape pipes coming clearly across the water. From her twin chimneys the smoke rose in a billowing cloud, as though Mac had orders to make Vicksburg as quickly as possible.

Roscoe looked around at the yellow flood, judging the distance to the nearest shore, but all hope of possibly swimming there, if the worst came to the worst, was out of the question. A quarter mile of fast-flowing water lay between the blazing hull of the *Cotton Queen* and the bank, and he could judge the speed of the current from the long streaks left in the surface by the snags that reared their gaunt heads like petrified reptiles. Besides, for all he

knew, Uncle Ben couldn't swim, and in any case there was the injured man to consider.

With a sudden inspiration he ran forward to the *texas*, holding his arm across his eyes to avoid some of the heat and smoke. The fire was blazing nearly up to the pilot-house windows at the forward end, and beyond it the deck stopped short where the explosion had torn away the planks. But as fortune had it, aboard this packet the great bell was located *aft* of the *texas*, almost between the tops of the paddleboxes.

Roscoe took hold of the clapper, clashed it against the rim, and the deep note of the bell boomed out like a warning. Again and again the note rang out until his ears began to sing with the reverberations, and the mournful sound seemed to fill the air and carry the note of tragedy and death across the silent river. It was years since he had been able to make so much noise—and enjoy doing it. As he gave the bell another mighty crash, the front of the *texas* fell in and covered the deck around him with a shower of sparks and flaming pieces of wood.

Roscoe brushed the hot ash from his hair and raised the clapper for a final ring when a plume of steam, followed by two more, rose each side of the *Magnolia's* starboard chimney. A few moments later the sound of her whistle—three blasts—came as music to his ears, and he watched her turn around in a sweep and come sidling down on the current.

As she began to round-to against the current again he could see Old Hickey leaping out of the wheelhouse window, and hear him shout something that he couldn't catch, while he made out the stolid figure of Sam Truckee turning the wheel spokes and chewing slowly. He heard the jingling of the engine-room bells and the gong for the yawl, and as soon as he saw the *Magnolia's* boat being lowered overboard he hurried down to the main deck to join Uncle Ben and Mas'r Quillum.

He found the old negro bathing the injured man's scalded flesh, his great hands working quickly and tenderly with loving care, crooning gently as he worked:

*Oh Peter go ring dem bells,
Ah heered f'om heaven to-day . . .*

On the way up to Vicksburg Roscoe had his hands full tending to the injured. Fortunately there were not so many as so frequently resulted when a steamboat exploded her boilers, and except for a couple of coloured firemen who stoically bore frightful burns that Roscoe saw would almost certainly be fatal, and a blasphemous professional card player whose right leg had been nearly blown off at the knee, the injuries were nearly all cuts and burns, scalded faces and shock. He found that the young mother who had passed him in a dazed condition as he boarded the *Cotton Queen* had had her arms badly scalded by the heat of the steam as she tried to protect her infant, and while he bound up her swollen wrists he felt moved almost to an unprofessional extent by her quiet acceptance of suffering.

The more seriously injured were laid out on the settees in the saloon while all the women passengers, with Captain Hickman sharing in the fuss, gathered around and administered lotions to burning flesh, cool bandages to feverish brows, and brandy to colourless lips. The well-meaning ladies were encouraged in their merciful work by their own black servants and the coloured stewards, whose eyes goggled at the sight of ladies and "gentlemen" near together in the same saloon and administered to impartially by the white misses.

It was entirely Uncle Ben's idea that Mas'r Quillum should be taken to Roscoe's own room, and Roscoe was too busy to suggest anything else. In any case the man was more badly injured than most of the passengers, and Roscoe felt he would rather reset his leg in splints in the

privacy of his own cabin than in the public saloon with swooning women to hamper him. By the time he did get along to his stateroom Uncle Ben must have given their passenger a vivid account of how they had rescued him from the fire, and there is no doubt that nothing was lost in the telling.

The man looked up from the mass of bandages as Roscoe entered.

"I reckon I'm very much in your debt, suh, for saving my life. Uncle Ben here has told me the danger you ran, suh, getting me out, and I hardly know how to thank you."

The man spoke in a cultured voice that had the musical cadence, the slight slurring of certain words, the easy drawl and the almost entire absence of r's of the well-educated Southerner. His face was lean and finely chiselled, with a high wide forehead, deep-set eyes that had an inner fire and a devilishness lurking beneath their honest gaze, and a mouth that in repose could look as tender as a woman's. His hair was iron grey and a clipped moustache and trim goatee added to his aristocratic features. Roscoe noticed the almost delicate hands with the turned back generous thumbs, and decided that he liked this man.

"It certainly was rather a near thing," he admitted deprecatingly as he rinsed his hands in the enamel corner basin, "especially with your leg broken—"

The fine eyes looked concerned.

"Do you mean to say, doctor, that my leg's *broken*? I can't feel anything."

"No. But you will," said Roscoe grimly. "I'll see what I can do to fix you up in splints till we can get you ashore, Mr.—er—"

"Colonel Quillon, sir. I'm sorry, doctor, I should have introduced myself befo'. Your servant here knows me. Don't you, Ben?"

"Yass, Mas'r Quillum," Ben agreed eagerly with his

face brightening up, "Ah sho' 'members you since you wuz a lil' bwoy wid Mas'r Bob."

"Quite right, Ben. You know, sir," Colonel Quillon added, turning to Roscoe, "I've been trying to figure out just how Uncle Ben here came to be aboard the *Cotton Queen*—"

"But Mas'r Quillum, Ah done tole you. De Lawd knowed you wuz abwoard de *Cotton Queen*, an' he done tole Mas'r Ross heah, 'Mas'r Ross, dey's a mighty fine gennlemen abwoard dat dere steamboat. Ah sho' want dat gennlemen saved.' An' de nex' minute Mas'r Ross he say to ole Ben: 'Come 'long, Ben, dey's a lot o' folks wants savin' abwoard dat dere steamboat.' So Ah done went 'long wid Mas'r Ross, 'spectin' dat mebbe you wuz dere, an'—"

Roscoe broke into a chuckle at the darkie's version.

"That'll do, Ben," he said laughing. "Now go and get me a bowl of warm water and another towel. Hurry along, now."

When the negro had gone he turned to the patient.

"I get a great deal of amusement out of that old man," he said. "You've known him a long time then, Colonel Quillon?"

"Nearly all my life, sir," said the Colonel. "Ben was born on my cousin's estate at Fairmile, up the Red River, and I've spent many a vacation over there with the Thébauts when I was a boy. Uncle Benjy, as my daughters have always called him, has always been a favourite of the family, and I was right worried when my cousin died that he might fall into bad hands. Lucy—my younger daughter, sir—wanted me to buy all my cousin's old servants, especially Ben, so that we could keep them all in the family, but I had more impo'tant business to attend to just then."

"I happened to attend the auction in New Orleans," said Roscoe. "I'm glad I did now."

"Yes indeed. I'm glad too that Ben has found a good master," said the Colonel. "Did you buy any others of my cousin's slaves?"

Roscoe shook his head. The memory of the scene in that auction room was still too vivid for him to talk about it impartially.

"By the way," Colonel Quillon continued, "did you happen to see what sort of a master Lulie got? She was quite a good-looking young mulatto girl and a likely wench for a lady's maid or a parlourmaid. She was a good girl, and I just wondered."

Roscoe hesitated.

"She was bought by Joe Sliver, the dealer," he replied in a low voice watching Quillon's face.

"Oh."

The colonel said nothing else, but the way he said "Oh" and the silence that followed was more telling than if he had said: "Ah well, that's too bad. A comely, well brought up girl like that; but they soon get used to the life, and a nigger girl thrives on it generally, even a mulatto wench."

Roscoe broke the silence with an unexpected remark.

"The only reason why I bought the old man was to free him," he said, as he applied a fresh bandage to the colonel's arm. "Does that hurt?"

Colonel Quillon shook his head.

"You're not an abolitionist by any chance, are you?" he demanded, incredulous.

Roscoe nodded. "Perhaps I am."

The colonel stroked his beard with his uninjured hand and looked up with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"Well sir, you're the first abolitionist I've met who owns a slave."

"Ben is not a slave any longer," said Roscoe quickly. "He's a freedman now."

"Yet he stays with you?"

"He seems to want to. He's a very good servant, and I pay him a small wage."

Colonel Quillon smiled. "Ah I see. As soon as he's gotten enough money he'll light out for the north. You see if he don't, sir."

"I don't think he will," said Roscoe shaking his head. "Ben knows he's free to go at any time, but I don't somehow think he will."

"I wouldn't trust a nigger with freedom and five dollars any day," observed Quillon. "I come from a slave-owning family, sir, and I've known hundreds of negroes—indeed, we employ over a hundred on the plantation at Lorrimer—and I can assure you, doctor, I've never met one I'd trust with money. But maybe you're right about Ben," he added thoughtfully. "There're not many niggers as faithful as he is, and I remember now that Bob, my cousin, used to send him out to collect rents from his overseers. But you know, sir, ever since my father was injured by one of his slaves who was trying to escape, I've never felt I would trust a nigger."

"I find it an interesting experiment at any rate," said Roscoe. "And now, Colonel, I'll have to dress your arm properly, and then we'll see about fixing your leg in splints."

"You go ahead, sir. I'm fortunate to have an English doctor to attend me like this. If it hadn't been for you, sir, I reckon I'd still be aboard the old *Cotton Queen*—or what's left of her."

"You have to thank Ben for that," said Roscoe shortly with native embarrassment.

Just then Ben came into the cabin with a basin of hot water and towels. He set them down and began to help Roscoe to remove some of the hastily tied on bandages while the colonel closed his eyes and lay quiet with set teeth. The black hands worked dexterously, as light and gentle as a young girl's, but they could not every now and

then help the dressings dragging at burnt flesh. Once when the colonel winced he felt Ben's hand steal over his moist brow, gently smoothing his hair, and like a childhood memory out of the dim past he heard the old familiar voice crooning in his ear:

"Lay yo' head quiet, honey, an' doan' you cry. You's got ole Ben right heah to luk aftuh you. Lay yo' head quiet an' trus' in Jesus, honey. Let de Lawd guide you an' keep you safe an' soun'."

The colonel tried to open his eyes and smile, but somehow he was too drowsy, too exhausted from the pain and the effort to keep from groaning and he felt the moisture from the corners of his eyes begin to course slowly down his cheek. The caressing voice went on, and he suddenly forgot the explosion, the blast of scalding steam, the sharp pain beneath the crashing wreckage, and the throbbing ache that had wracked him ever since; he was back on Cousin Thébaut's plantation at Fairmile, hiding behind one of the hickory bushes with Cousin Bob, waiting for Uncle Ben or old Sally Lou to open the door of their cabin. Lord how the nigger children would laugh to see Sally Lou a whooping and a-carrying on and flying from her cabin, like a frigate with stuns'ls set running before the wind, when she found those baby 'possums in her bed! And what a licking one of the darkies would get unless Bob's pa found out who really did steal the preserves out of Cousin Dora's storeroom. . . .

Just as it had been at Uncle Ben's suggestion that Colonel Quillon should occupy Roscoe's cabin while the *Magnolia* continued her way up to Vicksburg, so it was with the old man's tacit connivance that when they stopped at the landing, and the injured and other passengers from the *Cotton Queen* were taken ashore, it was he who arranged for Roscoe to take the Colonel home. The Quillons' plantation was but a few miles beyond the

heights of Vicksburg, towards the mouth of the Yazoo River, and he knew the colonel would be glad to have the old man's master to look after him until he had recovered from his injuries. That, he told himself, would mean that Roscoe would be a guest at Lorrimer Hall for a month at least—Southern hospitality would scarcely allow a briefer visit in the circumstances—and so long as Roscoe stayed with the Quillons so long would he, Uncle Ben, be able to enjoy the life at the old plantation.

It was years since Mas'r Bob Thébaut and the family had gone to stay with Mas'r John Quillon and their cousins, taking Ben along with them, and the old man looked forward to what he knew would be something like a reunion with some of his old friends amongst the house staff. It seemed as though the Lord had stepped down out of Heaven and arranged it specially so that Ben could once more bask in the hospitality of the coloured side of Big House life at Lorrimer. And how those darkies would goggle when he related his experiences in New Awlins, his importance as personal servant to a real English gennleman, his possession of "papers" that made him a freedman, free to come and go as he chose like any of God's chosen people; how they would whoop with admiration when he told them of his bravery in going aboard the burning *Queen* and rescuing unaided Mas'r John. Ben almost licked his lips as he contemplated the telling of that episode, he was not quite certain, indeed, whether he wouldn't describe how the Lord sent an angel with a flaming chariot to carry him and Mas'r John across the water back to the *Magnolia*. It would make him something of a demi-god amongst the other negroes, and even if he was an old man now, he could still appreciate open admiration in a comely gal like Miss Prissie who used to be Miss Lucy's maid.

Life, Ben told himself, was going to be good, just like old days in fact, on the Lorrimer estate, and he was sure

both he and Mas'r Ross were going to be made a real fuss of by everybody there. And truth to tell, he was more than thankful that they would not be going aboard the *Magnolia* for some time—the longer the better—for Ben had always harboured a mortal dread of steamboats and had only set foot on one to obey his master's orders, but nothing in the world would have induced him to confess this to anybody at all.

Whatever was the original source of the suggestion that Roscoe should accompany Colonel Quillon home and stay to attend to his dressings for a while, the colonel made the invitation and Roscoe accepted with the feeling that it would be a pleasant and a human duty for him to see the injured man safely home. He found John Quillon an interesting and attractive personality, a type whose counterpart he had met in the country homes of England, sturdy, level headed, gentle, thoughtful for others, hospitable and well bred, and he looked forward to the opportunity to see something of a Southern gentleman's home life, to experience plantation hospitality. He liked Colonel Quillon's voice, the intonation he found so fascinating and so impossible to copy, and it was a pleasure to listen to the colonel's conversation when he had become used to the dialect and river talk of Sam Truckee, Old Hickey and even David Warner the English shipping agent in New Orleans, for he had imagined they talked with a Southern accent. He had to admit now that until he had met Colonel John Quillon he had not known how a well-educated Southern gentleman did talk. New Orleans, he supposed, was too cosmopolitan, too full of racial mixtures to be pure in speech: it had far too many obsolete French words, Spanish phrases, Indian names and old-English expressions to produce true Southern speech; certainly, nobody he had met yet in his travels and business venture had delighted his ear with such a pure, musical, lilting drawl as his patient.

Old Hickey was characteristic when Roscoe told him he would be leaving the *Magnolia* at Vicksburg and perhaps staying at the Quillons' place for a week or two. His prickly nose seemed to glisten with pride.

"My boy," said the old man, resting a hand on Roscoe's shoulder and looking at him with his little black eyes, "that's the best thing you could do and I'm glad you can go and attend him. Colonel Quillon's a mighty fine gentleman and I've known him for many years. Yes sir, for many years. He's been one of my most distinguished passengers aboard the *Magnolia*. And", he lowered his voice, fingering his upper chin, "what the colonel was doin' aboard that goshdarn *Cotton Queen* packet ain't my business, but I hope the explosion has taught him more sense." And the old man broke into a cackle that ended in a fit of coughing.

"I'm afraid the colonel's going to be a very sick man after this," said Roscoe grimly. "It's the burns and shock I'm afraid of."

"Oh he won't suffer much from shock, the colonel won't," said Old Hickey boisterously. "He's a mighty tough man, Torrence. He was shot four times during the Mexican campaign in '48, and blame me if he even noticed it. It'd take more than a b'il'er explosion to kill Colonel Quillon," he added as he burst into another cackle, wiping his eyes with a gaudy red handkerchief. "Now listen: you keep a lookout for the *Magnolia* and I'll give you a mighty long blast on the whistle every time I pass you—for you know, don't you, the colonel's estate comes down to the river just above here? You can see the house plain from above Lachere Bend. He also runs a lumber mill just back of the levee in addition to the plantation. You'll be able to see the *Magnolia* and maybe when we get that freight contract I'll have some mighty fine profits to show for the next three-four trips. What say we jest have a gin fizz on the strength of it?"

The driveway that led up to the front porch of Lorrimer Hall was bordered for the first quarter mile with tall cypresses. The sides of the roadway were rutted with the wheels of carriages and the centre levelled by the horses' hooves, while between them ran two parallel strips of verdant grass and moss on which no one ever seemed to walk. In places the drive passed between banks of earth that were hidden beneath great bushes of rhododendrons whose blossoms hung over the road like faces peering down. Here and there a magnolia bush spread its riot of exotic white blooms giving Roscoe the impression that he was being taken into a tropical forest.

The carriage proceeded slowly, creaking on its springs, while the coloured coachman nodded over the reins and the ancient sorrel mare felt her way as though she suffered from tender hoofs. Like the driver's, 'Mandy's head hung down between the shafts and she walked with her eyes half closed. Beside the driver on the box seat Uncle Ben sat with head erect and an expression of importance on his face. He was looking forward to the moment when they would draw up at the Big House and he would leap down and announce the arrival of the Mas'r.

The colonel's leg was standing the jolting tolerably well, for Roscoe had made a skilful job of temporary setting, and with the broken limb propped up on the opposite seat the colonel had not had such a painful ride as he had expected. The burns on his arm and shoulder, however, were more troublesome, and the pain had brought a drawn, tired look on his face that made him look years older. Nevertheless he had kept up a quiet conversation with Roscoe most of the way from the steamboat landing, pointing out the aspect of Vicksburg as they left the city with the heights beyond and the batteries on the side of the hill. And when they had come to the boundary of the colonel's estate and glimpsed the hall in the distance, he had begun to explain to Roscoe how the cotton was

grown and cared for and what a time they had when it was ready to be picked and sent down to New Orleans.

As they came slowly around the last bend in the drive he said:

"There's the house. And I hope you'll be comfortable here, Dr. Torrence. I'll ask my sister to see that you have everything you want. I leave the running of the house entirely to her, and I shouldn't wonder", he added with a significant glance at Roscoe, "if you and Miss Quillon find mutual views about slavery."

Roscoe thanked his host, wondering just what the colonel meant, but his thoughts were interrupted by a shrill uproar that rose from a dozen childish throats. The carriage suddenly became surrounded by a number of excited negro children in varying states of rags and tatters. Shouting and leaping they vied with each other at turning cartwheels beside the carriage and walking on their hands, waving mud-caked black feet in the air immediately in front of the mare's nose, to her evident embarrassment. 'Manda came to a halt in her tracks with both ears leaning forward until Ben nudged the driver who in turn awoke with a sigh and urged the mare on with the reins.

A general cry went up amongst the negro children, and was taken up by still more whose black faces suddenly appeared on the verandah, from around corners and even in three or four of the upper-story windows:

"Massa's home! Massa's home!"

As 'Manda, nodding her head with each step, wheeled the carriage around the semicircular drive to the porch steps, Roscoe wondered for a moment whether by chance the Lorrimer house was a home for negro children. He had heard of establishments, negro "factories" he had heard them called, run solely to breed slaves, but he could not somehow associate Colonel Quillon with such a business. All the same, he had never in his life before seen a

large house literally swarm with so many black and near-black children, from shapely youngsters of eleven or twelve down to crinkly haired tiny tots that could do no more than stand naked with their thumbs in their mouths and stare up at the carriage, showing the whites of their eyes. From a row of black faces along the verandah came a chattering of shrill voices; black arms and limbs spun round the resigned 'Manda's legs as small boys turned somersaults in the dust, and little black girls in dirty gingham frocks, with hair in papers, held each other's hands in a mutual comfort group by the side of the porch, a little afraid to join the boys in the general welcome of the Massa.

The house itself, Roscoe noticed, was a large rambling place similar to many other plantation homes that he had glimpsed from the deck of the *Magnolia Queen*, but whereas those down river had mostly had two storys, Lorrimer Hall had three, with six immense white columns reaching up from the porch to the eaves of the upper storey. Each floor had its own verandah or gallery, each with its own mosquito screen, so that the windows and doors opening out on to the verandahs on the different floors could be seen only faintly in the sunlight through the fine mesh of the screens.

As Uncle Ben jumped down to open the carriage door a black woman, so fat that she waddled rather than walked, and wearing a white blue-spotted dress and a bright scarlet bandanna round her mass of jet black hair, swept out from a corner of the house like a deeply laden ship in full sail. A swarm of black imps fled before her, leaping, turning cartwheels, and shrieking with excitement, as she shook a kitchen cloth in her hands and bellowed at them.

"Go 'way you bwoys! Go 'long, outa de way. *Shoo!* You, Tappy, Sam, Jo, theh, go wan, outa de way. Cain't you-all see de Mas'r's arrive' an' he sho' doan' wanna see a passel o' niggers a-whoopin' all over de place lak dat." The old

woman stopped a moment to pant and fan herself with the cloth, while the infants took the opportunity to crowd around behind her and mount the steps of the house, chattering like a parcel of black monkeys. From there their little grinning faces took in all that was going on, while from the verandah above a hail of berries descended on their woolly heads from half a dozen more imps who had armed themselves for just such an opportunity.

The fat negress forgot the children and hurried to the carriage, wiping her hands on the cloth. Her eyes bulged with surprise at the sight of Uncle Ben, but her whole attention was taken up when she caught sight of her master's pale face and the bandaged arm.

"Mas'r John! Mas'r John, fo' de land's sakes!" she gasped breathless, "is you hurt?"

The colonel forced a smile.

"Not much, Aunt Mitty," he lied. "Just a little accident, that's all."

Aunt Mitty held up her hands in horror when she noticed the Mas'r's bound leg, and saw how tenderly Uncle Ben and the coachman were attempting to lift him from the coach. Even the children's voices suddenly became still.

While he bent over the colonel, Roscoe caught sight of a small figure in a white crinoline hurrying down the steps towards them, several other ladies suddenly appearing at the porch, and a girl's voice crying:

"Uncle Benjy! Oh, Uncle Benjy! Oh what a surprise! Has papa bought you after all and brought you home? Oh I'm so glad I just don't know what to do!" And Ben's solemn voice: "No Miss Lucy, de colonel ain't done brung *me*. Ah done brung *him*. He'm mighty sick man, Miss Lucy. We all gotta tak a mighty heap of cyare of de Mas'r, 'deed we gotta, Miss Lucy." And Roscoe stood aside as the young girl, her dark ringlets brushing her cheeks and her blue eyes wide with anxiety, rushed to her father's side and threw her arms about him.

CHAPTER XII

"Bur don't you find it very warm here after the English fogs, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe controlled the corners of his mouth and no sign betrayed the merriment beyond the twinkle in his eyes.

"Why yes, Miss Quillon," he assured her gravely, "there have been times when I've wondered what it is I miss most. And do you know, it's a secret longing to enjoy once again a real London pea-souper."

"A real London—wh—?"

"Pea-souper, ma'am. A fog, indigenous to London, as thick as pea-soup. They say true Londoners can't live without them for long."

Roscoe's eyes looked dangerously mischievous and he wondered how much the elderly Miss Quillon believed. John Quillon's unmarried sister had a sweet but intelligent face, and when she looked intently at any one her dark blue eyes had that penetrating clarity that suggested it was useless trying to hoodwink Miss Deborah Quillon. Ever since a fall as a child she had not had the use of one leg. Yet no one watching her cheerfulness, her quick perception and her interest in everything and every one around her, would guess that her infirmity had kept her a prisoner to her chair for the greater part of her life. In her black satin dress with the lace collar and cuffs, and her grey hair framing her pale, intellectual face, she looked frail yet full of spirit.

"That sounds very strange, Dr. Torrence," she continued, giving no hint of her thoughts in her expression, "and I should have thought nobody would have *enjoyed*

such a thing as a thick fog in a city. Of course, as a doctor doubtless you understand the advantages of your London atmosphere better than we do here, and it is possible people do thrive on fogs—pea-soupers I think you said?—all the year round in London.”

“Oh but Aunt Debby, I’ve read that they don’t *have* fogs all the year round in England. Isn’t that so, Dr. Torrence?”

Roscoe hesitated under Lucy’s friendly gaze. Seventeen, or perhaps eighteen, Miss Quillon’s younger niece was an astonishingly attractive girl with a beautifully moulded chin and rounded cheeks that blushed with the freshness of an early morning rose. Her dark hair fell in ringlets almost to her shoulders, giving enticing little glimpses of her small ears and the whiteness of her neck as she moved her head. But her eyes were perhaps her most attractive feature, large, trustful, with long dark lashes upcurling, they were of that soft blue seen between the clouds on a showery day that could disarm any one with their frankness and simple honesty. She sat on a high-backed chair that had been in the family for several generations, her narrow waist framed in the voluminous folds of her hoop dress of peach moiré, her small hands folded in her lap, and her eyes on their guest.

“Well, we do have clear days even in London, Miss Quillon,” Roscoe admitted with an effort turning back to Lucy’s aunt. “In fact, I hear they have far more fogs off Cape Cod in a month than we usually have in England in a year.”

Roscoe sipped his mint tea while the ladies expressed astonishment at his remark. It was no use, he felt, trying to get these charming people to believe that England was not perpetually fog-bound, any more than he imagined one could get them to make an honest good cup of tea, with milk and sugar, instead of this nauseating mint-flavoured iced liquid that they persisted in calling “tea”.

"Some friends of ours spent part of their tour in England last summer", said Varna, "and they told us—don't you remember Aunt Debby?—they had lovely sunshine nearly every day while they were in London." She turned her eyes on Roscoe. "Doubtless, Dr. Torrence, we have a most mistaken idea of the English climate and we must appear very rude about it."

Roscoe turned to the elder sister with close interest, fascinated by the rich accents of her voice. He had found the voices of some of the ladies he had met in New Orleans a pleasure to hear, but the intonation of these girls at Lorrimer Hall was so entrancing that he was content just to sit back and let them talk. Their voices had a quality of softness, a lilting drawl with a tendency to slur over certain syllables unknown amongst the crisper accents of English women, and the almost entire absence of the letter *r*, resulting in a rendering of the name of the house or his own as "Lawmuh" and "Doctuh Tawnce" which was wholly delightful to him. Although Miss Deborah's voice was similar there was some difference in her accents that was certainly not due to her age, but difficult to define; a slight tendency to be nasal that was absent from the speech of both the girls. Roscoe found himself wondering whether the accent was a native to Mississippi or had come from another state.

He watched Varna as she spoke. If she had not the exquisite untouched beauty of her younger sister, nor the same softness of outline and expression in her face, she was decidedly more arresting, and infinitely more like her father, the colonel. Roscoe could not decide which attracted the eye most, her hair or her eyes, but her eyes had that same intent, merry look that occasionally flashed in the colonel's when he laughed. Her hair was a mass of titian folds, made up into a coiffure that fell in curls about her neck and was at once becoming and somehow just a little daring; her finely shaped head set it off to advantage,

and Varna knew full well the effect of sudden movements to her curls. But it was in her eyes, changeable in colour from her father's grey to a hint of brown, that lay the power to attract, to command and to repulse in a flash. She knew, too, how to use those long lashes in conjunction with her fan, and the deep arch of her eyebrows could change to alter her entire expression while the fan hid the revealing curve of her mouth.

Her dress, with its square-cut neck and puffed sleeves of pale green taffeta, was chosen with the utmost taste for the effect it would produce, at once fashionable, orthodox, yet provocative. The crinoline skirt, draped now over more than half the settee on which she was sitting, was trimmed with flounces of lace that draped in delicate folds to the floor, while her shoulders were hidden, yet faintly revealed, beneath filmy folds of pale green tulle. With her finely cut features and proud bearing, Varna Quillon at twenty had learned to dress to distinction and to practise the arts of coquetry to an extent that her sister would never achieve.

"We are *so* interested in everything English, Dr. Torrence," she was saying, returning his gaze with an expression half amused, half challenging, so that he felt like an amateur boxer pushed unwillingly into the ring and made to face a young featherweight champion. "And Lucy and I just can't *wait* to hear all about your wonderful country."

"Anything I can tell you", said Roscoe with a little bow, "would be a pleasure to me, Miss Quillon."

The girl is extraordinarily good looking, he thought as she smiled at him, and she has beautifully regular teeth.

"Papa has promised to take us on the Grand Tour to Europe," said Lucy, turning her wide eyes on Roscoe, "as soon as Varna and I have become proficient with our French and Italian. But I just can't master those *awful* irregular verbs!"

Yes, Lucy's an extremely pretty girl, thought Roscoe, appraising her frank face and clear blue eyes, but I really don't like the colour in her cheeks: makes her pretty, yes, but I wouldn't be surprised if she were consumptive, poor dear.

"That", said the girl's aunt, laughing, "is because you don't apply yourself, miss. I keep telling you—an hour every day—"

"Oh but Aunt Debby, I *do*." Lucy's eyes sparkled with indignation. "But I just can't catch up with everything! There's my music, my singing, my sewing, and oh dear, how I shall ever find time to do more to my tatting I don't know. Really I can't find time to do anything but study these days."

"You'll find time to be at the Anson's barbecue next week won't you, Lucy?" asked Varna with a meaning glance.

The younger girl coloured.

"One of the Anson boys is Lucy's latest beau," added Varna maliciously to Roscoe.

"Oh Varna! How *could* you?" Lucy looked almost on the point of tears. "Randolf only held the reins because he thought Marshall might bolt with me. You know Papa said not to ride him because he's nervous, but poor Tilley was lame? Really Randolph was only being a gentleman."

From the play her sister was making with her eyes Lucy realized that her excuse was only taking her deeper into the mire of suspicion, and her patience nearly expired.

"Well I declare!" she exclaimed, "if a young lady can't let a gentleman hold her horse—why, Captain Duquesne would hold Rustler's bit for *you* if you let him."

"Now, now, Miss Lucy," broke in Aunt Debby's voice quietly. "You must not say such things. And you should not tease her, Varna, like that."

The two girls fell silent and their aunt turned to Roscoe. "Have you attended a barbecue since you have been in the South, Dr. Torrence?"

"No Miss Quillon," he told her. "In fact I plead ignorance as to what a barbecue is exactly."

"Why, don't you-all have barbecues in England?" asked Varna quickly.

Aunt Debby tapped her lightly on the shoulder with her sequin fan and frowned.

"Doubtless you will like to come to one then, Dr. Torrence," she said. "It's an open-air feast, and we make a great day of it in the South here. It's just one of our customs that they never have in the North."

"Something like what we call a picnic in England?" suggested Roscoe glancing at the two girls. "They're quite jolly for the young folks."

"They roast an ox for a barbecue," said Lucy with a piquant grin, "a whole one. And we all eat so much—or rather, the gentlemen eat so heartily that all fall asleep against each other afterwards, and the snores would wake the dead."

"Really, miss!" Aunt Debby's expression would have stopped the best story on earth. "I'm sure Mr. Anson would be honoured", she added turning to Roscoe, "if you, suh, would be the escort for my two nieces."

Lucy pouted prettily.

"Varna already has an escort," she said archly.

"Lucy," said Aunt Debby, "your manners are not entirely ladylike this afternoon. Maybe, however, if Captain Duquesne will be escorting Varna to the barbecue—"

"But I've not said he would," exclaimed Varna hurriedly.

Aunt Debby nodded smiling.

"Maybe not, my dear, but the gallant captain asked *my* permission—"

"When?" demanded the elder sister. "When, Aunt Debby?"

"Never mind, miss. But the captain did, and as I think

he is to be trusted I gave him permission." And she looked at Varna with the soft light of understanding in her eyes.

"So you see," said Lucy impulsively, "Varna's got her beau."

"And I", said Roscoe rising and bowing towards her, "shall be both charmed and honoured to have the privilege."

Lucy looked up at him with an impish expression in her large eyes.

"I shall feel most happy in such distinguished company, Dr. Torrence. I fear it's not for a mere girl to offer a doctor advice, but", she hesitated, "remember not to eat a *thing* the day before. Everybody, you see, expects you to eat heaps and heaps at the barbecue. Indeed, I'll tell Katie Lou not to lace me so tight next Thursday."

Aunt Debby threw up her hands and turned to Roscoe.

"What you must think of these young ladies I do not know," she exclaimed. "Really I declare! I don't know what the young miss is coming to these days."

But just what Roscoe was thinking of the two girls was probably not in the aunt's mind at all.

There was an air of restfulness about Lorrimer Hall that Roscoe found infinitely soothing. After their first slight reserve, becoming to Southern ladies with an unknown guest in their midst, Aunt Debby and her two nieces showed him every kindness and set themselves out to make him welcome. The colonel's insistence that Roscoe had saved his life and risked his own in doing it, put Roscoe in a category in their estimation of a true man of valour and honour: he was, in short, their idea of a gentleman, and the fact that he was English weighed, if anything, in his favour.

Did he but guess it, Roscoe was also rapidly becoming accepted as a person of great consequence in the servants' quarters, for Uncle Ben had not been slow to tell, over

and over again, of his master's kindness, his sense of fairness and his courage in helping Ben—according to the latter—locate their injured Mas'r and rescue him amidst the flames of the *Cotton Queen*. Knowing Uncle Ben of old and his versions of the truth, Aunt Mitty saw through the description of the rescue and decided that if her Mas'r Pap owed his life to any one, that one was the tall stranger from England, and such a feeling of tenderness uprose in her bosom at the thought of it that she baked special pies, prepared extra sweet cookies and made the most exquisite tarts in the hope that he would choose them when they were laid on the white folks' table. And because he was Mas'r Tawnce's representative in the quarters, Uncle Ben came in for a satisfactory amount of reflected glory and good-natured joking from the fat old cook who at any rate kept the old man supplied with as good food as ever appeared on the white folks' table.

"Go 'long wid you, Ben," Aunt Mitty would say as she stirred a bowl of flour, "Ah doan' b'lieve you nevah set foot on dat dere steamboat. All dat talk! Ah 'specs Ah knows who done gone into dem flames an' foun' de Mas'r an' brung him out. Ah reckons Ah do, an' he warn't no good fer nuthin' nigger neether." And she would roll her eyes and shake her wide hips with her throaty laugh.

Uncle Ben rose to the bait every time.

"You shush yo' mouf', you fat ole nigger woman. Ah done tol' you."

"Who'm you callin' nigger woman, huh?" demanded Aunt Mitty swinging round swiftly, for all her bulk. "You black as a tar bar'l yo'self, Uncle Ben, so what you mean callin' me nigger, huh?"

"Shucks, hit jes' slip out," said Ben, grinning, "jes' lak Ah might call you honey——"

"Doan' you go acallin' me honey nohow. Ah reckons Ah knows yo' tricks, black man. You keep outa mah way. Ah reckons you sho' eat 'nuff fo' two niggers. Ah nevah

see sech a walopper in all mah life! Ef you keep astuffin' lak dat you sho' won't wanna be seed at de barbecue."

"Me not seed at de barbecue!" exclaimed Uncle Ben smacking his lips. "Shush yo' mouf, woman. Ah c'n eat two—free—of dem white folks under de table an' *den* wallop one of dem pies, honey."

"You keep yo' hands off'n dat pie, black man," cried Aunt Mitty diving for the dish and lifting it away from his clutches. "And doan' you go acallin' me honey."

Ben sidled closer and smiled broadly at her with one eye on the pie dish.

"But Ah meant it, sho' Ah did—honey," he cooed. "Ain't Ah alluz said you's de sweetest honey in all Mississipp' an' de best cook dat ever put her hand to dough?"

It was no use Aunt Mitty trying to retain her hauteur when he stood as close as that and poured such blandishments into her delighted ear: whoever praised Aunt Mitty's cooking paved a short cut to her generous old heart. And so the pastry-making was almost bound to be somewhat delayed by some playful slaps and a ripple of soft laughter that invariably delighted the black imps who tumbled about the floor of Aunt Mitty's kitchen.

Roscoe found Colonel Quillon a very interesting man and they enjoyed long conversations in Mas'r Pap's bedroom every morning when he went up to attend him. The colonel made light of his injuries, as a soldier might, but Roscoe knew that the burns were very bad and he was anxious for a long time while the resulting fever lasted. The leg, broken just belqw the left knee had been reset and was now in splints and, beyond causing some discomfort it was no longer painful. The painful occasions were those when the dressings covering the colonel's left arm and shoulder had to be replaced.

"I wish I could remove my left side altogether," he said with a wan smile once while Roscoe was removing the caked lint with as much gentleness as he knew how. "It

would be fine if I could get along with my right side, sir, and leave you to fool around with my left arm at your leisure."

Lucy spent nearly every day by her father's side, reading to him with that soft lilting voice of hers that so delighted Roscoe he was loth to leave the room. At other times she would move quietly about the house, with a gentle *frou frou* of her skirts against chairs and bannisters as she passed to order chicken broth and jellies and all the invalid's delicacies from the kitchen.

"Miss Lucy's got the idea I'm a mighty sick man," remarked the colonel after his younger daughter had touched his feverish brow with her cool hand and rustled out for lavender water. "Do you know, Dr. Torrence, having a ministering angel around like that almost makes me feel I like being an invalid? Miss Lucy suah is a mighty good daughter."

Not quite so frequently as her younger sister, Varna came up to her father and talked with him. While she was there Roscoe had an instinctive feeling of being on his guard, as if he had to be ready to draw the rapier of his wit and spar with her at any moment. If her words were for her father, and her whole attitude riveted attention on the patient, her eyes were not such prisoners to the dictates of filial politeness, and more than once were raised to Roscoe's with a challenging glance. Whereas the presence of Lucy in the room brought an atmosphere of gentleness and repose—though, heaven knows, he thought, she was by nature a delightful little chatterbox and seldom entirely silent from morning to night—when Varna was near Roscoe was conscious of a certain tension, a feeling of reserve that brought out the Anglo-Saxon caution in him.

From Miss Deborah, Varna's aunt, he learned more about the Quillon family as he sat and talked with her one afternoon while she continued her crochet work.

"Yes, Dr. Torrence," she said, "it was a sad, sad day when Julia, my brother's wife, was taken. You have doubtless seen the portrait in the dining-room."

Roscoe recalled the oil-painting of Julia Quillon whose steady eyes gazed down upon the table from above the fireplace. There was such beauty and character in the pale oval face, and such a look of repose and understanding in the dark blue eyes, that he knew the painting must be lifelike. It was clear that Lucy had taken after her mother, for there was little of Varna in Julia's face, except in the purposeful set of her mouth.

"Julia was such a lovely girl," Miss Deborah sighed with a trace of sadness in her voice. "She was one of the Driscoll sisters. The Driscolls, you know, are an old Louisiana family. All three girls were great beauties, and Julia was the loveliest of them all. They are descended from an old Huguenot family, whereas one side of *our* family, the Quillons, was originally Russian—oh quite four generations back. Varna has been a family name for a long, long time, but of course Varna herself hasn't gotten any Russian characteristics that I can see. Are they not very fierce people, Dr. Torrence?"

"The Russians, Miss Quillon? Well, they have a very high culture in parts of Russia, I believe," said Roscoe, thinking of Varna's flashing eyes, "and they're a mixture of very warlike races. But it's terribly cold in Russia, and that helps to make them fierce."

"Ah yes, indeed? The Steppes, of course, and Siberia. How I should detest a cold climate, Dr. Torrence, wouldn't you?"

"Well, England's pretty cold at times, you know, Miss Quillon."

"Indeed it must be. And of course you all have these fogs too."

Roscoe ran his fingers through his wiry hair before risking any further remark.

"You were telling me about the family, Miss Quillon?"

The old lady looked up from her sewing with an eager expression.

"Why, yes, so I was," she said. "You know, Dr. Torrence, although I'm a Southern woman I was educated in the North. When I was only eight years of age my parents took me to stay with some cousins, the Fairfaxses, who had a place near Hartford, in Connecticut. I went to school there with the Fairfax children and of course became familiar with Northern ways and manners."

Roscoe nodded, realizing now why there was that shade of difference in the accents of Miss Deborah and her two nieces.

"But though I grew up in the North I never became a Yankee," Aunt Debby added with a faint smile, "for when you have been born in the South you are a Southerner to the end of your days. But my education did give me a different view of our own customs in the South here, and even now I find some of them difficult to understand. They are so very different in the North they look at life and behaviours and what is even right and wrong in such a different way from the way we take it here in the South. I'm sure, if you've not yet met many Yankees, Dr. Torrence, you'll be most interested to meet my cousin Ella's child, Stella. She's such a dear, good girl and we are expecting her to come and stay with us in a few weeks from now."

"It would give me the greatest pleasure," said Roscoe graciously, "but I couldn't dream of imposing on your kind hospitality till then."

Miss Quillon looked surprised.

"But *of course* you can, Dr. Torrence," she said earnestly in her musical accents. "I want you to understand that while you are here this is your home. In the South here, guests stay just as long as they please. We don't ever have those hurried visits like they have in the North—a mere

week or two. You see I've been in the North and learned how different their ways are from ours down here. I want you to make this house your home for just so long as you can be spared. You see, Dr. Torrence, my brother is greatly in your debt. You saved his life."

"Please, madam, I did nothing that any one wouldn't do in the circumstances."

"You are too modest, sir," she said with a smile, "as becomes an English gentleman. You are most welcome to Lorrimer Hall, and I feel sure you will be a very good influence on my brother. You see," she hesitated, "Colonel Quillon is a very headstrong man and inclined to do rash things at times. He will listen to your advice, and so long as you find life here pleasant I hope, Dr. Torrence, you will stay just as long as you wish."

Roscoe bowed again to the sweet expression on her face.

"Your servant, ma'am," he murmured. "Your kindness is so overwhelming that, like the average tongue-tied Englishman, I hardly know how to reply."

Aunt Debby smiled at the quizzical look on his face.

"Doubtless you will find some of our Southern customs a little different from those in your country," she continued, returning to her crocheting.

"I have met only very charming ones, so far."

"You have not been in the South very long, have you, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe told her briefly a little of his arrival in New Orleans.

"What an eventful life you've had!" she exclaimed. "Fancy coming to this country as a doctor and then going into steamboating. Why you must be a dual character, Dr. Torrence, indeed you must!" Her face lit up with animation. "But maybe you have not yet been involved in an affair of honour, have you Dr. Torrence? It is a barbarous practice that gentlemen insist on in the South

here, although I believe the law is to be altered to stop duelling with pistols. And I dare say you do not have feuds between families in England as we do in the South here, do you?"

"Nothing that amounts to bloodshed," Roscoe replied with a whimsical look. "We usually take them to court."

"I sometimes think the advance of civilization has been arrested in the South," Aunt Debby continued, dropping her work and looking intently before her. "There have been feuds between certain families in Mississippi for generations. The men of each family seize every opportunity to shoot and kill the menfolk of the other. And sometimes the feud has lasted so long that no one remembers just what it was that began it. Yet whole families have been killed, and some have even fled to another part of the country. They usually go up into the North where they don't have such things. You will doubtless meet one or two gentlemen" (it fascinated Roscoe to hear these ladies pronounce that word as though it were "gen'lemen") "at Mr. Anson's barbecue," continued Aunt Debby, "who have had affairs of honour and have taken part in family feuds ever since they were old enough to carry a pistol. Miss Varna's escort, Captain Duquesne, for instance, has a scar right here," and she touched her neck beneath her left ear with her fan, "from a bullet fired by one of the Clayton boys. The Claytons and the Duquesnes have been having a feud for twenty years or more. How many poor boys and men have been killed on each side I do not know, and nobody seems to be certain just what the insult was—indeed which side was insulted—and how it all started. Because he might meet one or other of the Clayton people Franklyn—Captain Duquesne—always carries a pistol." She sighed, closing her fan and picking up her work again. "To me it's all very horrible and really quite beyond understanding. I'm sure you all don't have such customs in England, do you, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe shook his head. Although he had read somewhere that affairs of honour were still fought in the Southern States, it was stimulating to be brought right up against the results of a family feud amongst friends of the Quillons.

"No," he said, "we've given up fighting duels in England. I suppose we've grown into a pretty mild and law-abiding nation. I have a feeling that as soon as any inter-family shooting began in England there'd be a large-bearded policeman at the front door asking awkward questions."

"That is the entire trouble with us Southerners," said Aunt Debby, "we've scarcely gotten any laws and we're certainly not law respecting. Honour, as you have doubtless noticed, is the creed by which our menfolk conduct their lives."

"And an occasional case of murder," he suggested, "is all part of the custom."

Miss Quillon raised her head and looked intently at him.

"There are worse things in the South than defending one's honour with a pistol," she said significantly. "Nowhere else in the world, since the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, have there been such sinks of iniquity as in certain streets in New Orleans, Natchez-under-the-Hill, and even in part of this fair city of Vicksburg." She paused dramatically while Roscoe waited, wondering what on earth she was going to allude to next. "It's a terrible thing", she went on, her voice suddenly rising, "that such things should be, that men should tolerate amongst the beauties of nature the vices of mankind and spread the ills of those vices amongst the flower of our youth! Far be it from me to cry for the vengeance of God to be brought down upon such places of ill fame, but there are times when I feel that the honour and purity of our Southern womenfolk is preserved at a terrible price. I sometimes wonder what will become of it all."

Roscoe was silent, completely taken aback by this unexpected outburst, by Aunt Debby's clear reference to such a tabooed subject.

"I often dream very vivid dreams and they make me afraid for the future of this land," she continued, her eyes grown large and intense. "I'm no traitor to my own people, who have always been slave-owners, for I am Southern born, but I dread the fate that threatens to overwhelm the South with this terrible curse upon it. And the South, our fair South, is under a curse, Dr. Torrence. I am certain of it. Whatever they may quote from the Bible—and I am a God-fearing woman, Dr. Torrence, and love my Bible as no other book—but I cannot, I cannot believe that God in His infinite mercy meant any of His people, black or white, to be slaves. And slavery is the true curse of the South." For a moment Aunt Debby looked past Roscoe with a fire smouldering behind her eyes. "Time and time again I have implored my brother to free all his slaves. But it's—it's no use. He nearly consented, but he keeps on putting it off. I lie awake at night thinking, oh wondering what will happen to all these poor black people if anything should ever happen to John—to Colonel Quillon. We could not hope to keep on the plantation—he doesn't even realize how great the debts are—and I could not keep the servants, let alone all the field hands. Many of our people were born on the estate, were married in the chapel—for I have always insisted that their unions must be made regular—and I lie awake and think of them sent to the auction, sold to cruel dealers down river, torn asunder never to meet again. It's too terrible to think of their helplessness and to feel one cannot help them."

She broke off and Roscoe saw her eyes fill with tears.

"I don't think it's as bad as that, Miss Quillon," he assured her in his best sick-room manner. "Besides, Colonel Quillon isn't going to die yet. He's a particular healthy gentleman."

"I pray God he will not," she said fervently, "but you don't know how wild my brother can be at times; how he rides, the risks he runs, and when he's—I mean when he visits his friends in the city, there's sometimes a shooting affair, and twice he has been brought home wounded from such brawls. I always fear that some day—"

Roscoe was tempted to exclaim: "What a man. Why he's *lived!*" but nodded his head sympathetically.

Unexpectedly Aunt Debby's voice changed and she smiled at him with all trace of anxiety gone.

"You must forgive an old woman's curiosity," she said, "but I'm positively entranced by your change of—one must call it, profession? I do indeed wonder what made you give up medicine and become a steamboat captain."

Roscoe let that pass. He supposed any one connected with steamboating would be a captain to Aunt Debby.

"I've always wanted to own a ship," he told her, "ever since I was a little boy. To be a sea captain and put to sea in search of adventure was my boyhood dream. And as I found myself in New Orleans, unable to practise because I hadn't got the State pass for medicine, it seemed the great opportunity—to buy a steamboat and see the Mississippi."

"Oh how delicious—in your own boat!" Aunt Debby's laughter rippled like a young girl's. "If I were a man do you know what I'd do?"

Roscoe leant forward.

"No," he said in a stage whisper.

"I'd fit guns on my boat and board any steamboats I met on the river. I'd be a steamboat pirate!"

Roscoe laid his head back and gave his full-throated laugh while Aunt Debby began to fan herself, her eyes sparkling.

"Do tell me, Dr. Torrence," she said at last, "what month were you born in?"

"June."

"And the day?"

"The fifth."

Aunt Debby closed her fan with a snap and sat back with something of a triumphant look in her face.

"There you are. As I suspected. You're a true Geminian, you see."

Roscoe looked blank.

"Don't you know, Dr. Torrence," she continued, "that people born under the sign of Gemini have dual personalities, that they are restless and never content for long with any one thing? They want to do many things, and nearly all of them at once. You were born under Gemini, and that accounts for your sudden change from practising as a doctor and plunging, if I may choose the word, into the excitements of steamboating. You see, one half of your character is intellectual, studious, sympathetic, concerned with the study of medicine and with helping other people's sufferings. Isn't that so?"

He nodded, wondering.

"I can see that you too suffer", she continued, "when you cannot help others. And the other half of your character—ooh, how different it is! It is forceful, impatient, dominating, full of love of movement, change, travel, excitement. It makes you very practical and farseeing, and it makes you restless and, maybe just a little intolerant. So different from your studious, sympathetic self. But that is how the planets arranged your character when you were born, and all your life you will crave change, new experiences and activity."

Roscoe passed his hand under his chin.

"Well, I've never felt my character dissected and laid bare so quickly before. I suppose you must be quite right when I come to consider it. But it makes me feel, Miss Quillon, as though you've seen all my faults at one glance!"

Aunt Debby smiled significantly.

"Not being able to walk about," she said quietly, "has

its blessings. It has enabled me to make a study of the stars and the planets and their effect on human beings. And people are always so interesting. One sees so much good in people, and sometimes, I fear, much that one regrets in people, simply by studying them. Have you not studied astrology, Dr. Torrence?"

"I can't say I have," he admitted.

"It's a most fascinating subject," she assured him. "Of course I'm only a woman and haven't a very good head for figures, and you really want to be something of a mathematician to work out an ephemeris. But it's so wonderful to be able to tell a person's character if you know when they were born."

"It must be a little disconcerting at times," Roscoe suggested with a short laugh. "Like discoveries we doctors make about patients' health that we dare not tell them."

Aunt Debby looked keenly at him with her clear blue eyes.

"Sometimes one does see things in peoples' character," she admitted, quietly, "that one does not tell them."

Roscoe laughed. "I suspect you're keeping back the most interesting—or the most glaring—fault in mine," he said.

Aunt Debby shook her head.

"If I could see any real fault in you", she said, "it would be your impatience and impetuosity. But those are not really *faults*," she smiled, "in a man."

Roscoe bowed. Miss Quillon was one of the most outspoken women he had met, and with her soft, pleasant voice and intelligent mind, he found her more than easy to talk to, the kind of woman with whom he could discuss many things without the fear of being received with blank amazement or a fatuous polite reply.

"There's a very great charm about life in these Southern States," he said, "and I could very well settle here and

feel content. When I left England I couldn't help thinking of my native Kent, and I felt that after a month on the Amazon amongst the heat and tropical flowers and fevers and diseases I'd be thirsting for a glimpse of those lovely green fields again, and the sandy lanes and hedgerows, the hop fields and the quaint oast houses that you see all over the county. You see, Miss Quillon," he added, turning to her with a bright light in his eyes, "I'm a Kentishman at heart, even though most of my working years have been spent in London, and when I decided to travel out to Brazil to study diseases it was a wrench to leave those green fields behind."

Aunt Debby nodded, watching him with an understanding expression.

"And was it only medicine that sent you away from home?" she asked gently.

Roscoe looked uncomfortable, hesitated. Then he said: "Not entirely. I was married eight—it must be nearly nine—years ago, and I'd taken over a good practice in a fashionable part of Kensington. I suppose it claimed too much of my time, or perhaps I was too engrossed in my work to give enough attention to—" he nearly spoke her name—"to my wife. I don't know. But when it seemed everything had turned out well, the practice had grown to become a very successful one, and we had moved to a much larger house in Brompton Road, my wife—" he let his hand fall on his knee, "my wife left me. That was two years ago. It was more than a year before I found her. She—her lover had left her, deserted her, with no money and no home. I traced her to a wretched room close to the new Euston station, a horrible place. And when I got there I found her dying of pneumonia. It was too late then, too late to bring her home. She died before I could save her." Roscoe dropped his head in his hands, running his fingers through his hair. "It was a cruel joke on the part of fate that allows a doctor to save the lives of scores

of patients—people who mean almost nothing to him—and yet lets the one he loves most dearly die before he can save her."

Aunt Debby stretched out her hand and touched his head.

"You poor, poor boy," she said in a voice deep with emotion. "How you must have suffered. What strength must God have given you to bear that cross."

Roscoe looked up and slowly shook his head.

"I couldn't believe there was a God just then," he said slowly with a hard look in his eyes. "I felt there couldn't be. I just had to go, get away somewhere, anywhere, right away from London, the West End, from the endless stream of fashionable patients with their imaginary complaints. That's why I suddenly decided to plunge myself into work on tropical diseases and to go and study them where they originate."

"But you came to New Orleans instead?"

"Through the steamship getting burnt, and then what I saw aboard that slave ship, and at that auction in New Orleans when I bought Uncle Ben, I felt there can't be a God in heaven to allow such things to happen. What's the sense, the meaning of it all, if such cruel and unnecessary things are allowed to happen? Why wasn't I allowed to find her—until it was too late?"

Aunt Debby shook her head with a compassionate smile.

"The Lord's way is a strange way," she said, "and He sends us these trials to prove us. Don't let it embitter you, don't let it weaken you. Won't you try to find God again and put all your trust in Him?"

Roscoe shook his head.

"I sometimes wish——" he began.

Aunt Debby smiled through a veil of tears. In the expression on her face the beauty of youth transcended the sadness and sorrow of old age.

"Poor, dear boy," she said tenderly, laying a hand on his shoulder. "If you ask God to come to you, to help you, He will. But you have to ask Him. Won't you open your heart to Him now? The Lord has chosen you to carry on His works in the world. You have indeed been tried in the fire, and you have not been found wanting. You have done much good. Surely, many patients have owed their health, their lives to you, and you have saved the life of my own brother. You may be called upon to save many yet. Isn't that God's good work—don't you *feel* that you are working for Christ when you lay your hands on the sick body, the fevered head, the dying heart, and bring relief, comfort, life back to those pain-wracked limbs? When you retire to-night ask Him to help you: think about these things, and you will know a contentment of soul that I know has not been with you these last three years."

Roscoe took her cool fingers gently in his own and lightly touched the back of her hand with his lips.

"I'll try," he said, unable to say more.

He did not notice the look of gratitude that swept over her face.

CHAPTER XIII

THE day of the Ansons's barbecue broke with a soft breeze that came across the river and rustled the leaves outside Roscoe's bedroom window. From an early hour the whole place seemed to be astir, for the field hands went off to their cotton rows at six and their chatter began as soon as they stepped out of their cabins. The house servants were up, too, and Roscoe could hear their voices in the quarters, raised every now and then in their soft laughter, but more often churlish and low so early in the morning. The voices of the negro children were not yet to be heard: their mammies somehow kept them in bed until the sun had risen higher over the tall cypresses at the back of the house. It would not be long, though, before one would hear the shrill chatter of the piccaninnies, and when Uncle Ben came to wake Roscoe with his early morning cup of coffee it was quite probable a little black face with two bright eyes and crinkly hair would peer round the door and gaze timidly at him for some moments. And if there were other small black feet padding about the passage outside the visitor might venture a tremulous "Mawnin' Massa", just to show the others how at ease she felt in the presence of the white folks.

That, Roscoe thought, cupping the back of his head in his hands and staring contentedly at the ceiling, that was one of the delightful features about Lorrimer Hall. Life seemed to have a background, a certainty that was both soothing and impressive. One did not worry about what would happen in six month's time; time, that enemy of mankind, was not a substance here to be saved in

minutes and seconds, as a miser hoards his pennies, but something to be used by man for his convenience. If to-day would not do, there would always be to-morrow. The house had been here, unchanged, solid, homely, for eighty years or so—the proud monument of one of the first Quillons in Mississip’—and it would go on like this, solid, unchanged, hospitable, comforting for generations. One just felt that. The cemetery would have more names added to its hallowed memory; the crops would be picked and sent down river in bales time and again, the seasons would come and go; even some of the trees in the garden might be felled while striplings grew up to spread their shade; but Lorrimer Hall would still be there, its rooms mellow with the gracious, courteous, peaceful lives of each generation.

The idea of this permanence in a land where speed, slick business methods, sudden wealth and garish ostentation were inducements held out to the rest of the world, impressed him: it was like hearing a cultured man’s voice amidst the noisy brawl of an East End mob. Yes, Roscoe told himself as he stretched luxuriously, he liked the South and this way of living. He liked too the freedom allowed the coloured people, the free and easy way the black children seemed to have the run of the house and the garden. So far as he had noticed, nobody minded where they went or what they did, so long as they kept out of the parlour, the drawing-room and one or two special places. But anywhere else in the house, in the passages, on the central stairway, even in one’s own bedroom, one was quite likely to come across a small black form curled up asleep, or interrupt the subdued chatter of a game of chuck. These comic little black faces and soft-padding feet seemed to be a part of the place, like the furniture in the hall and the dogs in the yard.

He supposed life was pretty much like this in most of the spacious Southern homes, and if these black servants

were technically slaves, and their children belonged to their masters from the day they were born like the horses and the dogs, their lives were very free and comfortable, and they certainly did seem to be treated as part of the family. When he thought of the lives of the skivvies and drudges in the basement kitchens of great houses at home, and their wretched unheated rooms in the garret, he could see how much better was the lot of a slave in a household like this.

He realized, of course, that he had not yet seen anything much of the field hands. They lived in a group of cabins back of the house and a quarter mile or more from the house servants' quarters. He intended exploring the estate, for he had never seen a cotton field close-to nor felt the soft white bloom between finger and thumb, while he intended to see what impression the field negroes and their cabins left on him. His host was obviously an indulgent master, and the servants were probably a little spoilt in consequence, but for all he knew Colonel Quillon's overseer might be a very different type of man, and the negroes who worked in the fields in a very different position to the pampered house servants. Kind as a master might be, Aunt Debby—he already thought of the vivacious lady with affection—had pointed out the underlying danger and curse of the institution when she had mentioned her anxiety about the slaves in the event of the colonel's death. Roscoe supposed their lot would be like that of the Thébaut slaves: husbands separated from wives, children torn from their mothers, all sold indiscriminately to no one knew what kind of master. The whole problem seemed to be continually changing.

The long wail of a steamboat's whistle broke into his thoughts. Roscoe leapt out of bed and stood in front of the open window, stretching and ruffling his hair. Lorrimer Hall stood on a slight rise and the front yard—garden as he naturally called it—sloped gently down towards the

foot of the levee so that the first-floor gallery of the house was about on the level of the top of the levee. From his own window that opened out on to the second verandah Roscoe had a view of the Mississippi where it curved away, the best part of a mile wide, towards the west and swept around past the Lorrimer plantation, down past the Vicksburg bluffs and, curving back towards the west, disappeared behind the low-lying Louisiana shore that looked like a dark line of trees fringing a strip of yellow sand. It was here an immense yellow lake twisted into the shape of a huge horseshoe. Over towards the farther shore he could make out a long flat streak on the water like a half-sunken island with a little shanty built in the middle of it. He recognized it as a lumber raft, one of those curses to navigation and the pilot's nightmare, that drifted down from heaven knew where, an acre or more of giant logs lashed together in charge of a crew of rip-roarin', whisky swilling singing scoundrels. There was always something moving on the yellow bosom of this old river.

But his eye searched the river for the steamboat and around the bend he saw her, booming down on the current like a frigate in full sail. She was a big Orleans packet—one of the Anchor Line boats as the golden anchor monogram hung between the chimneys proved—and those stacks were pouring great billows of black smoke high into the air in the time-honoured fashion as she came in sight of the Vicksburg landing. Roscoe stood watching her, a feeling almost of exultation rising within him much as he used to feel as a boy when he watched a big ship dock by London Bridge or saw an express train rush through a station, the irrepressible pride in man's mechanical genius.

The steamboat was nearly opposite the house now. He could read her name emblazoned around the paddlebox, CINCINNATI—he remembered admiring her at the wharf at New Orleans—and he could easily see the lavish gilt

carving and gingerbread work running along her hurricane deck. High up, above the Texas deck, in his own lofty wheelhouse, the figure of the pilot—it would certainly not be a cub now with the boat making an important landing—could just be seen turning the spokes of the wheel. The mate and a handful of crew were on the fore-deck getting the stage ready to lower, while a plume of steam separated around one of the chimneys and once more the bell-like note of her whistle wailed across the river.

"By gad, some day Old Hickey and I'll own a boat like that," said Roscoe to himself. "We'll build up the finest line of steamboats on this muddy old river."

He watched the *Cincinnati* until she had closed in under the bluffs by the waterfront. Then he turned from the window and another thought struck him:

"I wonder what that likeable old blackguard Hawke is doing now? Pirating around the Caribbean in another schooner like his last one, I suppose—no, he'd never find such a lovely little ship as the *Black Arrow* again. And I wonder what became of that comic little Cockney. I suppose Quirk followed the captain on to the West Indies. Lord what a pair they were!"

The door opened and Uncle Ben's face appeared above a tray containing steaming coffee and cream.

"Mawnin', Mas'r Ross," he said, flashing his teeth. "Ah hopes you slep' well, suh. Ah done brung you dese yer crackers, Mas'r Ross, case you was hongry and ast fo' somp'n to eat, but Ah hopes you ain't done fergit dat dis is de day of de barbecue."

The carriage had been ordered to be waiting at the front porch at ten o'clock. Nobody seemed to care a jot that it was nearly eleven before Jeff, in his bottle-green coachman's coat, brought the old family hack around to the front yard and quietly continued his sleep hunched up on his box with his beaver hat tilted over his nose. Having been ready this last half-hour Roscoe sat talking with the

colonel in the latter's room, listening to tales of West Point, the Mexican campaign, the last election and now this talk of Secession, while keeping one ear open for intimation that Varna and Lucy were ready to go.

There were indeed plenty of sounds from the young ladies. Their rooms were just along the passage and most of the chattering and excitement carried quite clearly to the colonel's room. While the two sisters fluttered in and out of each other's bedrooms, comparing dresses and chiding one another for not being ready before, Roscoe could not help hearing all they said. He heard Katie Lou's voice raised in wild protest: "Fo' de land's sake chile, Ah cain't fix yo' curls ef'n you keep abobbin' yo' haid so!" and Lucy's horrified shriek when her sister swept into her room, eyes flashing and cheeks flushed, in only her petticoats and pantalettes, with her new mauve dress over her arm:

"Varnal How *could* you! Suppose you *met* anybody in the passage like that?" and Varna's reply was equally audible: "Miss Willett's made it too tight around the waist or I must be *spreading!* I tell you I can't get it on." There followed an earnest confab punctuated by Katie Lou's soft voice, and then Aunt Mitty creaked up the stairs breathing audibly, and Roscoe controlled the muscles of his face very creditably when her voice announced "Shucks chile', you ain't growed no bigger. Hit's jest de way hit's cut, dat's all. Ah'll sho' lace you into dat dress in less'n no time if Ah busts me arms doin' hit."

By the time the girls were ready Roscoe was waiting at the carriage door talking to keep Jeff awake on his box. As they came down the steps with their parasols held above them Roscoe caught his breath at sight of the two sisters. Lucy looked slight and shy in a wide hooped dress of white muslin trimmed with flowers, her fresh young face framed in a white flower-trimmed bonnet. But pretty and exquisite as the younger girl appeared, Roscoe's eyes

were attracted and held by her sister. Varna showed her wonderful hair and her fine figure to the greatest advantage in quite a simple dress of pale mauve taffeta whose waist was, if anything, even smaller than Lucy's. Her curls glinted like gold in the sunshine from beneath a saucy little bonnet of the same shade as her dress, and she instinctively held her mauve parasol with its deep lace trimming a little to one side so that the sunshine should strike her hair without touching the bloom on her cheek.

It was with a malicious little glint in Roscoe's eye that he noticed how short her breathing was, and thought what a struggle it must have been to lace into that admirably small but medically criminal waist. What on earth had become of the girl's stomach and ~~liver~~, he reflected, raising his hat and offering her a hat ^{and} ~~two~~ to the ^{air}, let alone her pelvic organs, God almighty. Hawke is she could hardly take a breath, and her face too another nately flushed and pale. It was a marvel to him'd never who maltreated their bodies in these ~~days~~ unnamable again. not only contrived to live, but even ~~pride~~ ^{pleasure} backney.. lived. Lucy, he was glad to notice, was not ^{quite} so Westy laced and she gave him a charming smile as he helped her into the carriage, but even her slender waist was too compressed for health or reason.

Really, he thought, as he got in and sat down facing the two girls, it was a pity women couldn't dress ~~possibly~~ like that young maid of theirs who was standing on the bottom step of the porch with her slim figure faintly outlined by the thin white cotton dress she wore, while her black face was slashed with white splashes of teeth and eyes. Katie Lou, grinning and bobbing after the carriage in open admiration of her lovely mistresses, looked a perfect child of nature, and Roscoe could not resist an admiring glance at the black girl's easy stance and the supple grace of her long limbs.

"Aren't they cute lil' darlings?" asked Varna suddenly

looking intently at Roscoe. He hesitated a moment until he realized she referred to the handful of laughing negro children and dogs that were scampering after the carriage.

"They're good fun," he agreed.

"Good fun?" She looked puzzled, and then smiled.
"Oh what cute saying you all have in England!"

Lucy sat up in the sea of white and mauve muslin that seemed to fill the carriage, her blue eyes sparkling and her cheeks rosy with excitement.

"Oh it's going to *be* such fun!" she exclaimed, snuggling up to her sister. "I'm right certain you'll like it, Dr. Torrence." She clapped her hands excitedly. "And no chaperons to take us there. Isn't it too wonderful?"

Roscoe put his head back and gave his hearty laugh, so that Jeff nodded once or twice and opened his eyes and the old mare mistook it for a command and broke into a five mile an hour trot.

"Really I feel this is going to be a dashing affair."

"Now don't laugh at me, Dr. Torrence," Lucy said, pretending to pout, the dimples shadowing on her cheeks.
"It's all very harmless fun, and you ought to enjoy it."

"I'm going to, I skipped breakfast."

"Ooh, did you? So did I." Lucy's eyes opened wide, "and Varna had no supper either last night. She's never have gotten into that dress if she had had—"

"Lucy! How can you say such things about me, when you look so *dreadfully* vulgar and—and tomboyish with those red cheeks of yours? Why must you let them get so red?"

The younger girl suddenly looked petulant.

"Well I never put anything on mine to make *mine* pale, so there!"

"Lucy!" Varna's eyes flashed. "I declare! You stop saying such things or you go home this minute. As if I—as if I—oh, it's a horrible suggestion to make to your sister, and in front of a—a gentleman."

Lucy's mood changed as quickly as it had risen.

"I didn't mean it, Varnie," she said smiling up at her sister. "I was just teasing. Your eyes look so splendid when you get mad that I wanted Dr. Torrence to see. And you do look lovely, darling."

Roscoe spent most of the drive wondering whether Lucy was a sweet impetuous little darling who ought to be kissed, or a dangerous little minx who deserved to be spanked. By the time they had arrived at the barbecue he had decided that both would be equally pleasant, and perhaps necessary some day.

There were three or four other carriages and a spindly buggy or two drawn up near a clearing in the woods, and a number of men and women had arrived to form a merry group under the shade of a big sycamore tree. The ladies seemed to be of varying ages, probably chaperons with their charges, Roscoe decided, while the men, with one or two exceptions, were all fairly young. Running his eyes over the group he was surprised to note that whereas the women were all dressed in their best outdoor clothes for the occasion, and one or two—such as Varna—bordered on the height of fashion, the men were generally careless and untidy in their clothes. In fact Roscoe suddenly decided that his own natural taste for correct attire had brought him to this affair in unnecessarily smart clothes. Still, he thought, he'd rather feel well dressed and looking his best—and his tall, well-built figure and strong features did look well in the light grey suit with its long well-cut coat and slack grey trousers—than be shabby and ill at ease amongst so many strangers.

A tall, good-looking man of thirty or so stepped out from the guests and came towards the Quillons' carriage with easy grace. He swept off his straw hat and revealed straight, well-cut features, a clean-shaven chin, black straight hair with the fashionable clipped side whiskers, and dark brown eyes that fastened on the elder of the two girls.

"Ah Miss Varna. Miss Lucy, your servant," he bowed gracefully from the hips. "I've counted the minutes till you arrived."

Alighting from the carriage Roscoe returned the bow and held up his hand to Varna. She hesitated, smiling.

"Captain Duquesne, let me introduce Dr. Torrence." The two men bowed again. "Dr. Torrence is from England."

For some unspecified reason Roscoe felt relieved that Varna had not called the captain by his christian name. But she gave her hand to him as she got out of the carriage, while Roscoe assisted Lucy. He was interested to meet Captain Duquesne, having heard a little about him from Aunt Debby, and at first impression he could not tell whether he was going to like the man. The captain was studiously courteous and gallant in the way he assisted Varna out of the carriage, and he had an attractive flashing smile for her, but there was something suave, something too easy and self-assured about his politeness that roused Roscoe's suspicions of him—just the eternal difference, he supposed as he gave Lucy his arm, between the old Anglo-Saxon and the Frenchman.

The two girls greeted a lady with silvery hair and a sweet face who kissed them both and took them under her wing. Miss Duquesne, Roscoe learned when he was introduced to her, was Franklyn—the captain's—aunt and had come to the barbecue specially to act as chaperon for the Quillon sisters.

"Although I don't imagine I shall have to look after them *all* the time," she said in a charming drawl with a half-mischiefous glance from her nephew to Roscoe.

There was a great deal of chatter and laughter as Varna and Lucy alternately threw arms about a tall dark girl and cried "*Louisa darling!* How sweet of you to invite us," and Roscoe found himself introduced breathlessly to the Anson girl—in honour of whose whispered engagement

this barbecue was being held—and her two brothers, Willard and Randolph. As he shook hands Roscoe felt a preference for Randolph the younger brother, a square-shouldered youth of perhaps twenty with merry questing blue eyes and fair, silky hair. His brother was darker with a saturnine face and a brooding expression in his black eyes. Watching him Roscoe thought of Cassuis and his "lean and hungry look".

Before he knew it he was being introduced to one guest after the other, in nearly every case to his embarrassment as "Dr. Torrence, a brilliant doctor from London". Coloured servants were bringing round trays of iced lemonade, sherbet and mulberry wine for the ladies, and tall glasses of rum punch, rye whisky and mint juleps for the gentlemen and certain of the more matured ladies. Tongues unused to inactivity for long, were being loosened and a babel of voices rose above the group and worried the birds in the branches overhead. There was also a delicious smell of roasting meat in the air, and while Lucy was carried off his arm into a circle of excited girl friends and he found himself talking to a near middle-aged lady in a bright green dress, Roscoe located the appetising smell. An ox had been roasted whole over a slow fire all the previous day, and now a couple of sweating negroes were basting the richly browned carcass with long-handled ladles. Near the pit of glowing coals two coloured women were busily engaged over improvised tables preparing delicious etceteras and sweets. Around them, like a plague of mosquitoes, a dozen black children tumbled and whooped, getting in the cook's way, being cursed by the men and the women alternately, stealing morsels of food whenever opportunity offered, and generally behaving as a dozen children, whether black or white, would behave at an open-air feast with papas and mamas at home.

"I've so wanted to visit England, Dr. Launce. I've heard

so much about it from dear relations and dear friends who have made the Grand Tour. My father was connected with a banking firm in London, and he often said—" Roscoe bent a polite but slightly deaf ear to the lady in bright green whose name he hadn't caught, while she prattled on and lightly held his arm when he bowed and tried to edge away. "I've always said how wonderful it must be to be able to see your dear queen and her dear Prince Consort in London almost any day. I should just *love* to be able to see Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey and, what's that place Sir Something-or-other Wren built during the fire of London? St. Paul's cathedral, wasn't it? Don't you *love* that fine building, Dr. Launce? I always say—"

Lucy rescued him after another ten minutes and, with a rum punch pushed into his hand, he found himself introduced to more people and roped in to play a game that he knew from childhood as "musical chairs". In the shafts of sunlight that streamed through the overhanging trees making patches of bright green on the grass, the dresses of the young women became patches of moving colour as they danced and whirled around while music of sorts was drawn from an old violin and a banjo by two whimsical negroes. Followed by a species of "kiss in the ring"—with a great deal of girlish laughter and male guffaws but without the kisses—the games were played with proper decorum while watched by a group of elderly chaperons from the shade of the tree, and Roscoe was surprised to find himself entering into the spirit of the fun and really enjoying it. The rum punch helped, while he found Lucy's companions extraordinarily interesting. He knew they were the daughters of neighbouring planters and were all more or less of the best society in the county, and he had been prepared to meet the inevitable frumps, the distressingly plump girls, the plain girls, the girls with freckled faces who were to be found in this and any other

gathering; but he had scarcely expected to meet so many perfectly lovely young women. As he looked about him while they danced in the shade, at the whirling, billowing skirts, the graceful wasp waists, the bobbing sun hats and bonnets and the flying ribbons and curls, he thought that nowhere had he ever seen so many girls at once who looked to him utterly beautiful. In their delicately moulded chins, their straight noses and gracefully arched eyebrows, even in the softness of their eyes and the gentleness of their expressions, these girls seemed to have some quality in common.

For a long time, as he joined in the frolic, he tried to locate it. Their voices all had that enchanting softness of quality and that Southern lilt and rhythm that was entirely different from any English voice though they spoke almost the same language; and their laughter was moderated, soft and rippling like water tumbling amongst pebbles. And then it came to him: they all shared in common the quality of good breeding, of gentle, dangerless lives, and a place in the world that put them on a pedestal of virtue.

Roscoe could understand now why he had heard it said that the womenfolk of the Southern States were amongst the most beautiful in the world. He could speak with some experience of the lovely young ladies in the fashionable drawing-rooms in the West End, but he would have to admit that even in London society there was not that air of pure loveliness, of completely natural graciousness and charm possessed by these Southern girls. He thought, as he watched them tripping gracefully over the grass in the arms of their attentive partners, that this quality of freshness, the chief charm of these girls, lay in their unsophistication and their lack of boredom, while their exquisitely good looks were just part of their heritage of gentlewoman reared in the midst of security and affection, safe from the ills and disillusionments of the world, brought up to be pure, to expect gallantry, to

live good virtuous lives in the same tradition as their mothers and their grandmothers.

Although Varna was not noticeably different from the majority of her friends, he could see that she was admirably self-possessed in the middle of a circle of eager young bloods, and if her eyes glinted every now and then with a hint of boldness, she kept her feelings to herself and controlled the conversation with consummate skill. But, watching her out of the corner of his eye as he fetched a glass of wine for a charming elderly woman, he had to admit that Varna Quillon had more character than any two other girls present.

Lucy was receiving a good deal of attention from the younger of the Anson boys, and it was clear to the looker-on from the young girl's coy glances that Lucy already considered Randolph Anson as her beau.

As the only English guest present, Roscoe was made not only very welcome but accepted into their midst with a delightful lack of reserve. The fact that he had been introduced by the Quillon sisters was sufficient for him to be acknowledged by every one present, and when the story was whispered around that this tall doctor from London—"fancy, my dear, he owns a steamboat on the river too!"—had risked his own life as well as those of his boat's crew to save Colonel Quillon, there was a little flutter where young hearts are ready for such excitement.

Although he entered into the fun of the harmless games, as befitted a gentleman, and returned many timidly arch glances with a friendly smile, he purposely held himself aloof from the younger folk between the games, and either saw that the chaperons and the more elderly women were being entertained, or joined the menfolk. Like most men of his type Roscoe was far more at ease in the company of his own sex, and he was glad to find these Southerners hospitable and friendly and anxious to put the Englishman entirely at his ease. They were mostly of a

type with which he was familiar amongst English gentry: neither bookish nor too intellectual, but warm-hearted, hard-riding, straight-shooting, heavy-drinking, heavy-gambling men to whom their code of honour was as important as life itself. Some of them were evidently very heavy drinkers, and a few doubtless would be taken home by their servants in a comatose state: that he had learnt was not a disgrace in this section of the country so long as the drunken man's friends spirited him away from the ladies before his unfortunate state became obvious.

Wanting not only to leave a good impression but also to enjoy the various aspects of this open-air feast, Roscoe was sparing with the liquor and took only enough to loosen his tongue and entertain his male acquaintances with stories of foxhunting and English country life.

By the time all had feasted, the men feeling they wouldn't look another pie in the face for months and even the ladies certain that, short of unlacing, they were beaten, there was a lull while the negro servants cleared away the dishes and plates. Conversation, even amongst the girls, was desultory and subdued, and a few of the more elderly women were already frankly nodding. The men began to think of other things and to wander off into the woods, while the girls drew together and proposed a little tour of exploration in the opposite direction as "so good for the digestion, darling". But before they went the elder of the Anson brothers rose to his feet and, after looking a little embarrassed around at the expectant faces, began:

"Friends, ladies and gentlemen." There was a little giggle from the girls, but Willard resumed with an air of gravity. "I have an important announcement to make. But first let me say that I hope you have all been enjoying yo'selves" (cries of "oh yes, indeed! We are!") "and will continue to do so. What I have to say is this," (he looked around at the groups of men and girls and smiled) "I

have to announce the betrothal of my sister, Louisa, whom you all know and whom you see seated under that tree there just covered with confusion and blushes" (there was some giggling then and a few puzzled looks. Most of their friends knew that the Anson boys leapt the proprieties sometimes in sheer fun and no one minded so long as nobody else tried it) "the betrothal of Louisa Anson to Lieutenant Dick—or Richard if you like it, but I reckon he likes to be called Dick—Lougee, of Tallahassee, Louisiana, Lieutenant in the United States Navy, whom you see, strangely enough, standing under the very same tree as Miss Louisa!"

There was general applause and a rush of excited young ladies to throw their arms about the happy bride elect, while their voices shrilled with endearments, Miss Anson looked embarrassed and exultant in turns, and the unfortunate Lieut. Lougee looked overwhelmed and sheepish.

Roscoe feeling sorry that the poor young man's private intentions should be made a sort of public frenzy, turned to the man next to him, who had been introduced to him as Judge Horlock.

"Lieut. Lougee looks a fortunate man, Judge Horlock," he remarked. "But tell me, is any one ever a plain Mr. in these parts?"

"Well, nobody of any account, I reckon, sir. If they've not already been to West Point or Annapolis, they mostly join the local militia, and the rank gives them an edge over the man without any. At any rate with the young ladies, maybe."

"This is my first experience of a barbecue, sir," Roscoe continued. "Is it customary for betrothals to be announced on these occasions?"

"Sure. That's why we have barbecues mostly," said his neighbour, looking around with a grin. "And I shouldn't wonder if we have one or two more announcements to-day."

In the heat of the afternoon a sense of well-being infused its lethargy over the guests. The middle-aged ladies forgot their charges and sat together nodding peacefully; one or two couples, greatly daring, wandered off with furtive backward glances at their somnolent chaperons; several of the more elderly men were frankly snoring; a group of merry-eyed young people including Lucy, the Anson brothers, Louisa Anson and her betrothed, gathered round under a spreading oak tree and gossiped and flirted. The rustle of an indolent breeze in the leaves and the steady drone of the insects seemed suddenly to have become louder, as though nature were once more imposing herself upon the frivolity of mankind.

From a comfortable couch of mossy grass beneath a stripling oak, Roscoe gazed contentedly around at the scene. He had been carrying on a desultory conversation with Judge Horlock who was now lying on his back with his head against the trunk of the tree and his hands folded across his slightly protuberant stomach. Roscoe looked for Varna and caught sight of her at the far end of the clearing, still wide awake with her arm about another girl's waist, carrying on what sounded like a mischievous conversation with Captain Duquesne and two other men. Nature's demands, thought Roscoe, for rest and sleep when the stomach is full were only given in to by the elderly: the youngsters had far more exciting things to think of than just resting after a meal. Watching their eyes and faces and restless bodies he began to think that he must be getting old himself, for if he was not pretty careful he would soon be lying on his back with his hands folded like Judge Horlock's, snoring perhaps just as contentedly.

A sudden movement in Lucy's group drew his attention. He could not see what had happened, but the younger Anson boy was on his feet facing a short dark-complexioned man to whom Roscoe had not been introduced. He

looked as if he had been drinking while Randolph Anson stood very stiff and erect, his eyes blazing in a face twisted with anger. From where he sat Roscoe could see that Lucy was looking up at the two men with frightened eyes.

Randolph's brother jumped to his feet and faced the other man. An ominous hush had come over the assembly. Every one held their breath watching the three men as they spoke to each other in voices icy and restrained. Roscoe could not hear what they were saying, but he caught the words "insulted" and "satisfaction" which the younger Anson spat rather than said.

Judge Horlock raised his head with a grunt and began to sit up.

"Looks like a disagreement," remarked Roscoe when he saw the judge was awake.

"Huh? H'm—more than that, I reckon," said the older man, pursing his lips. "Know who that fellow is?"

"No."

"He's Jasper Gould," Judge Horlock said significantly. "He's had more affairs of honour than any other young blood in the country and—he's a killer. By God, Dr. Torrence, I don't like the look of it. I don't know what it's all about this time, but if that young Anson rip challenges him he hasn't a chance with a man like Gould. Doesn't the young fool realize—"

The judge was scrambling to his feet, and instinctively Roscoe also got up. They moved over towards the rigid group. Jasper Gould had turned, his dark eyes alight, and began to talk in low tones to another man who had joined them.

"That's his cousin, Josh Maltby," Judge Horlock told Roscoe, shaking his head. "I reckon they mean business."

Randolph Anson was handing his brother a card. Willard took it and, bowing stiffly, gave it to Josh Maltby. Jasper Gould and Randolph Anson stood apart, their faces turned

from one another, while their seconds went through the formality of challenge and acceptance.

As they came up to the group, Roscoe heard Willard's tense voice saying: "Choose yo' time and yo' place, suh, and my brother will meet you." With immobile face Maltby bowed stiffly: "My cousin will have the honuh, sir," he said crisply, "to-morrow morning at six, at the clearing by the Two Forks pike."

For an instant longer the two men looked at each other, then Jasper Gould and his cousin turned and walked away.

Lucy touched Randolph on the arm, her eyes enormous in her pale face.

"Oh you mustn't do it, Randolph," she pleaded. "I can't allow you to meet him on my account."

He looked down at her with surprise.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lucy," he said slowly, "I cannot allow a lady to be insulted like that."

"But—but he—surely he'd apologize. That would make it all right then and you wouldn't have to—"'

Randolph stared at her. "Miss Lucy," he said in hushed tones, "you don't know what you're asking. No mere apology would suffice to defend a lady's honour."

"But Randolph, it *mustn't* be like this! You—you might be—oh!" Lucy looked wildly around at the others, her face pale and drawn with agony. "Oh can't *any* of you suggest something? It mustn't happen like this."

Randolph took her hand gently in his own.

"Miss Lucy" he said in a low voice, "you know I'd willingly die for you *any* day. And I esteem it a great honour to be able to defend your name. Won't you allow me to do my duty?"'

Lucy gave a little cry and turned away. Then she caught sight of Roscoe and ran up to him.

"Dr. Torrence, oh Dr. Torrence," she cried, her eyes like those of a frightened child, "can't you do something

to stop this—to—to save Randolph?" For a moment she clung to him.

Roscoe shook his head.

"I'd give all I possess if I could help," he said, "but one can't interfere when two gentlemen have the Code to keep up."

Lucy did not notice the hint of sarcasm in Roscoe's voice as she buried her face against his sleeve, and her shoulders heaved with great sobs.

"Take me home, Dr. Torrence," she cried, choking back her tears. "Please, oh please take me home."

CHAPTER XIV

"I'm afraid Lucy's taken this pretty badly," said Colonel Quillon, stroking his goatee between finger and thumb. "I'd no idea she had lost her heart like that to the young fellow."

"She's very young, sir," Roscoe suggested; "under eighteen isn't she? Young girl's hearts don't stay broken for long at that age, you know, with so many young men around to help mend 'em."

"Oh she'll get over it," the Colonel agreed as he shifted on the couch and gazed out of the window. "'Pon my soul, Dr. Torrence, these young ladies nowadays have so many beaux a father hardly knows one from the other. But", he turned his fine head in Roscoe's direction, "young Anson was a right fine lad. It's a pity he wasn't quicker on the trigger."

Roscoe hesitated and then plunged.

"I think it's both a tragedy and an indictment on society," he said significantly, "that a promising lad like that should have to go and get shot."

"He was defending a lady's name, sir," said the older man sharply. "Any gentleman would count it an honour to do the same. You know, sir," he added in a calmer tone, "our Southern customs are evidently not the same as yours in England. Some of them may be a little old-fashioned, and our ideas of chivalry may seem to you a little out of date; but to men who have been reared in Southern traditions there are certain things that a gentleman is bound to defend, with his life if need be. And the Anson boy was doing what was expected of him."

"Yes, I understand that, Colonel. It merely seemed to me that there might be another way of settling a dispute besides shooting."

Colonel Quillon's eyes flashed. "Not when a lady's honour is in question, sir," he said with emphasis.

"The ball passed through the right lung," Roscoe explained, ignoring the remark. "I did what I could but it was no use. One just has the satisfaction of knowing that young Anson winged Gould—got him in the shoulder."

For a moment the old man's eyes lit up. His face was in partial silhouette against the window and Roscoe noted the high forehead, the large purposeful nose and set mouth, the proud poise of the head on his shoulders, and the expression in his deep-set eyes, and he felt that here was a man to whom duty would come before anything else in the world. And as he glanced at his host's features Roscoe wondered what the old man would say if he really knew his guest's opinion of some of these medieval customs that formed the social code in the South. Death in itself was nothing new to Roscoe. Heaven knew, he had seen enough of it in his early years in the London hospitals not to be over-sentimental about it. He had got well used to the way different people reacted when they knew they were going to die; he had already seen the mortal terror that paralysed some and turned them into piteous-eyed, ashen-faced corpses while they still lived, and he had been touched by the calm resignation of others and the jesting indifference of the Cockney workman who lay with terrible injuries after an explosion. He could recall the tragically jocular "All right, dearie, I've had me fling, and there ain't nobody left to mourn me anyway" of the unknown streetwalker whose fate was already sealed by the time he had examined her. Years spent amongst the stark facts of hospital life had given Roscoe the belief that most men and women, the rich and the

poor, became brave and resigned as soon as they realized there was no longer any hope. It was hope, he thought, the hundred-to-one chance of being able to cling to life after all, that gave us a horror of death, not the aspect of death itself. There were always exceptions, of course, the hysterical, the morbid, the hopeless and life's spoilt children, but in his own experience they had always been in the minority.

So it had been early that morning after the barbecue when he had held Randolph Anson's head in the crook of his arm and applied dressings to the bullet wound. Hardened though he thought he was to cases of this kind, yet he felt a lump rise in his throat as young Anson—God in heaven, a boy of twenty!—opened his eyes and smiled up at him, his clear young face tinged with the first rays of the dawn that slanted through the trees.

"I reckon—he—got me," he gasped, saying each word with difficulty. "Didn't I get him somewhere?"

Roscoe nodded.

"You've winged Gould all right. It was a good shot. His cousin's attending to him."

The blue eyes misted and smiled.

"Did I? But I ought to have—ought to have—" he began to choke. "Tell Miss Lucy I—" But the blood was already in his mouth, drowning his gallant words, pulsing with his young life as it ebbed away in Roscoe's arms.

"Yes, sir, a fellow don't ask for a higher recommendation here in the South", Colonel Quillon was saying, "than to die for a lady's honour. I reckon if Major Anson was alive now he'd be mighty proud of his boy. Yes, sir, mighty proud."

"And his mother?" asked Roscoe.

"Miss Anson is a Southern lady, Torrence," the Colonel replied, looking straight at him, "and I reckon she won't let her grief stand in the way of feeling mighty proud

herself of young Randolph. Maybe, like Miss Lucy, she'll take it pretty badly at first—seeing he was her youngest—but there isn't any better way a mother could wish her son to die, if the Lord calls him, unless it's in battle defending his country. And I reckon his brother Willard won't sleep any too well till he's given that Gould fellow another chance to prove himself."

"You mean challenge him to another duel?"

The old man's eyes sparkled. "Just that, Torrence. And Jasper Gould'll have to be a right smart man if he wants to keep his skin around him with Willard Anson on his trail. I guess Willard Anson's as good a shot as his old pap was. And he was a powerful good shot with a derringer. Yes, sir."

"And if one or the other started shooting first, if they met, say, on the open road," asked Roscoe, "how would that be accepted by people here?"

Colonel Quillon's face went grim and he shook his grey head.

"No, sir. Neither of those Anson boys would draw a gun on another man without the formality of a challenge. They're a mighty proud family. But", he began fingering his beard again, "I can't say so much about the Goulds, and maybe Jasper Gould will try to get young Willard if he sees the chance."

"And if he did," continued Roscoe keenly, "that would lead to a feud between the Goulds and the Ansons?"

"It most certainly would," agreed the Colonel.

"And a feud of that kind might go on for generations," Roscoe persisted, "until all the men had either been killed off or one family or the other gave in and migrated to another state?"

"Well, sometimes they make it up," said the Colonel dubiously. "Every now and then a girl from one family runs away with one of the fellows from the other, and that's sometimes enough for the two families to attend

the same church on Sundays without first laying their guns down in the aisles. But sometimes", he added with a slow smile, "it's just enough to set 'em off again if the feud's eased off of late. Still, it's gen'lly the womenfolk that manage to bring about a—uh—"

"Reconciliation. 'Alas! what fools we mortals be,'" quoted Roscoe with a twinkle in his eye. "But with your permission, sir, I'll try a few distractions on Miss Lucy to see if that'll help her to forget this affair."

"You couldn't do better," said the Colonel heartily. "Take the young ladies riding around the plantation. You'll find Blaze a fine stallion for yourself. You ride of course?"

Roscoe nodded. "Only moderately, but I've followed hounds at home on one or two occasions," he said modestly.

Colonel Quillon's face lit up.

"Real English fox-hunting, huh! I hope you'll come and stay with us again, sir, when our hunting season is on, but", he smiled, "I warn you we don't hunt quite the same way as you doubtless did at home. And I hope this accursed leg of mine will be set for riding by then. By God, I do sir, I'm powerful tired of lying up like this."

"You keep it still now, Colonel," Roscoe advised him, laughing, "and you'll be hopping about on it in three months' time."

"Three months! Why, dadblame it, sir, d'youth reckon I'm going to limp around for three entire months—"

Roscoe spent an enjoyable morning astride Blaze riding around the estate in company with Varna and Lucy. The two girls rode well while Roscoe found Blaze, a fine black stallion with a white blaze between his intelligent eyes, a sympathetic and understanding horse to ride. He was glad of that, for he had not ridden for ten years or more, and at first he thought he would have lost his easy balance

and grown stiff and heavy handed. But he soon found Blaze the most natural animal to ride, and with the two girls he cantered around the cotton-fields in great contentment.

In her dark blue velvet riding habit Lucy sat her chestnut mare with easy grace, but it was clear that she had no zest for riding just now, and Roscoe was concerned to see how pinched her face looked under the little straw hat with the bow tied under her chin. Varna, on the other hand, sat her handsome grey Medusa with magnificent grace, her bottle-green habit setting off to advantage the blaze of her hair and the sparkle in her dark eyes. Twice out of devilment she put the mare at a jump that caused Roscoe to catch his breath, and he only allowed his own horse to follow suit because he trusted Blaze's instinct. All the same, he wished to heaven, as he caught Varna's mischievous eyes watching him, that the girl wouldn't do things like that. As he watched Medusa tossing her fine head he felt that either his neck or Varna's, and more probably his he thought ruefully, would get broken if she didn't rein in her high-spirited animal.

They rode around the cotton-fields where the negroes were standing in the midst of the tall stalks, cutting and pruning with curved knives and breaking up the parched ground. Soon the boles would swell and burst with cracks of dazzling white amidst the green, and the long hours of picking would begin. As they reined in their horses and sat looking over the sea of green waving in the breeze, Roscoe asked:

"What else do you grow on the plantation, Miss Varna?"

Her reply, given in the soft, lilting accents that fascinated him, sounded like: "Oh we jest plant 'most everything. There's catton heah, and cowan in the next field, and then there's lumbuh down at the woodyard."

"Then *that's* the sound I've been hearing," exclaimed

Roscoe listening again to the sudden wail coming across the fields in the wind. "Let's go down to the mill?"

They cantered off, skirting the tall canebrake, until they came to the foot of the levee. Then they turned right towards the bank of the Yazoo river and approached the woodyard from below. A big mulatto with a missing tooth, leaving a dark vacancy in his mouth, greeted them as they rode up to the engine-house. Varna reined in close to the man's upturned childish face.

"You sound busy this morning, Jake," she said, her voice suddenly crisp and imperative. "Has another raft arrived?"

Jake grinned, rolling his eyes up at her.

"No, Missie, dere ain't no raf' come down dis low water," he said in a thick voice, "we jes' got Big Massa asawin' up dem logs f'om de las' raf' wot's bin picklin' in de river. Dat's 'm now, heah dat?"

The voice of the big circular saw rose in a dismal moan above the steady puffing of the engine, whose thin stack stood above the log cabin like the chimney of a steamboat. Beyond the engine-house lay a pile of cordwood, neatly stacked.

"They've gotten two of those dreadful things here," said Varna, putting her hands to her ears as the saw shrieked its way through a clean maple log. "They call that big one Big Massa and the smaller one Lil' Massa. Papa says the hands think there's a spirit in those saws."

"I can well believe it, Miss Varna," said Roscoe. "Can't you hear the voices of the devils in that big fellow?"

The log moved away from the singing teeth and four buck negroes caught the two halves and hauled them clear, while another log was slid into place, ready to be ripped down the middle.

Roscoe pointed towards a great pile of half-round logs from which two negroes were slowly stacking a heavy

dray. The logs were all about the same length, eight feet or so, and cut from the two halves of cottonwood trees.

"Where are those logs going, Jake?" he asked. "For a plank road hereabouts?"

"No, suh," the mulatto headman replied above the wail of the saw, "dey's ties fo' de new railroad."

Roscoe stared. "New railroad, eh? Where's that going?"

"Hit ain't gwine nowheres, suh. Dey's jest alayin' it right theh back of de plantation."

Roscoe caught Varna's eyes on him.

"Haven't you heard about the new railroad from Jackson, Dr. Torrence?" she asked. "It's going to pass right by a corner of the cotton-field. They say we'll be able to ride into Vicksburg on the cars before Christmas."

Roscoe glanced across the broad expanse of the river and watched a shanty boat like a child's Noah's ark far over against the Louisiana shore drifting down on the current.

"H'm," he said as though to himself, "when that railroad's running there won't be so much freight for the river."

"Varna dear, can't we go back now?" asked Lucy, as her mare, sensing her restlessness, turned around. "I'm sure this noise is going to give me a headache."

The two girls moved off, but for a moment Roscoe reined in Blaze.

"Jake," he called down above the howl of the saw. "Hi, Jake! When d'you expect another raft of logs to come down from the north?"

"Maybe nex' week, maybe sooner, Massa," replied the mulatto. "Ef'n de water rise in de ribber den it'll sho' be sooner. We bin expectin' a taf' mos' any day now, soon's de ribber rise."

"Well, listen—whoa, Blaze!—send word to me at the Big House as soon you see the raft coming. I want to come down."

Jake's teeth gleamed.
"Sho' Ah will, Massa."

Then Roscoe let Blaze have his head and galloped after the two girls.

The morning rides around the plantation were evidently doing Lucy good. The melancholia that followed the death of her beau was slowly being dispersed under the combined sympathy of her family and the devoted kindness of Aunt Mitty, Katie Lou, Uncle Benjy, and all the other servants in the house. Although it was hardly becoming for a young lady in such tragic circumstances to recover too quickly from her bereavement, Randolph Anson had not, after all, been her official beau, and when she got around to thinking about it, she had to admit to herself that there were many other handsome and attentive young men from nearby plantations who would be only too glad to fill the vacancy left by poor Randolph.

The evenings after supper, when Miss Deborah and the Colonel had their coffee on the verandah whence they could look over the dark line of the levee at the lights moving on the river, while the two girls played and sang in the drawing-room and Roscoe stayed to turn over the music, were resumed once again. At first Lucy could not bring herself to sing, fearing that her voice would break and dissolve into tears if she were to attempt her favourite songs. She played the accompaniments for Varna, however, and Roscoe was delighted to hear the elder girl's voice with its fascinating suggestion of huskiness. Varna had a full voice which had been well trained, and she sang her favourite "My Love is like a Flower" with a verve that showed that singing came as naturally to her as breathing. Lucy's voice was low and sweet with a little natural tremolo that most of the ladies declared was utterly charming.

They were very pleasant evenings, whether there were

any guests to supper or not, and Roscoe never tired of listening to these accomplished young ladies playing while the moon rose huge and golden over the dark cotton-fields and the hot Southern night vibrated with the drone of cicadas, the sawing of the katydids and, from far down in the cypress swamp, the faint grunting of the bull-frogs.

Twice during these lazy weeks of his stay at Lorrimer Hall, Roscoe recognized the distinctive chord of the *Magnolia Bloom*'s whistle as she passed on the broad bosom of the river, and once he rode in to Vicksburg and met her at the landing. The sight of the old sidewheeler with her tall thin stacks and the gingerbread work along her decks never failed to make his heart beat faster. He could see she was loaded deep with freight this time and the rails looked black with passengers as he stepped on to the lowered stage.

"And half of her's mine," he told himself with almost boyish glee sniffing the air, "but God knows which half."

The smell of her as he mounted the hurricane-deck stairway, the conglomeration of scents of hot tallow, pinewood smoke, paint, molasses, cotton, tarred rope, oil, cigar smoke, food, cabins, ladies' perfumes, the very atmosphere of a steamboat, greeted him like the intoxicating perfume of a beloved mistress home from a visit to relatives.

Captain Hickman met him in his cabin as full of enthusiasm as a man may well be.

"Torrence," he exclaimed shaking Roscoe's hands between both his own palms and wrinkling his face until his eyes looked like currants in a plum duff. "Torrence my boy! We've been full up both trips and we've had to turn away freight at Seymore's landing. Couldn't take another bar'l. No, sir, not a one. Jest you imagine that, huh! I tell you trade on the river's beginning to boom and darn my pants if we ain't comin' in for a heap of profit at this rate. How's Colonel Quillon?"

Roscoe told him, heartened at the news.

"And here's some news for you, my boy," continued Captain Hickman as the negro boy brought them gin fizzes. "I've heard Mark Sayers is selling out his other two boats. That *Cotton Queen* disaster jest about finished him. What d'ye think of that?" And the Captain gave one of his cackling laughs that buried itself in his upturned glass.

"But what's Sayers going to do now if he sells out his boats?"

Captain Hickman scratched his head.

"Well, I did hear he was buying up shares in a new railroad they're building way back there."

"Mark Sayers is generally considered to be a keen business man, isn't he?"

"Well, most folks reckon he's right smart," admitted the old man, "but sellin' out his boats and goin' in for railroads don't make sense to me. No, sir, it jest don't make sense at all."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Roscoe thoughtfully. "When they can run trains through to New Orleans I'm afraid the planters'll be sending all their cotton that way. And then they'll take to travelling by the railway themselves."

Captain Hickman clapped his hand on his partner's shoulder.

"Shucks, Torrence, they ain't such saps," he said reasonably. "You won't ever get them planters and their families goin' by the cars. Look at the danger. Look at the smashes they have. And they won't send their freight thataway, either. No, sir. The railroad might be able to bring the freight quicker to the landings than the mule teams have done in the past. But it'll still be freighted by steamboat to N' Awlins."

Roscoe smiled and drained his glass.

"Well, Hickey," he said, "we've got ourselves properly

mixed up with steamboating, and perhaps we'll just have to fight the railroads, damn them. Anyway I'm coming down to New Orleans before long to see Dave Warner. With freights as they are now I've an idea we might form a company and add another boat to our fleet. Perhaps both of Sayer's packets, eh?"

Old Hickey's face wrinkled into a look of profound admiration.

"My, but now you're *talking!*" he exclaimed.

"Next trip you come down from Memphis," Roscoe told him, "I'll join you again, and we can discuss plans. I expect I'll be able to leave the Colonel by then."

"And his two daughters?" suggested the Captain with a wink, but Roscoe gave him a dangerous look.

"You cut that out," he said gruffly.

Some mornings he spent in the spare box-room which had come to be known as the surgery. Here Roscoe had accumulated a limited collection of bandages and lint and bottles and medical supplies so that he could prepare dressings for the Colonel and tonic for the rest of the household undisturbed. At first there had been frequent young visitors with bright eyes watching him out of eager black faces, but when he had allowed them each a spoonful of the vile-tasting concoction he was mixing in one of the bottles, or insisted that they all be given a large spoonful of nice castor oil, the surgery ceased to have its early attraction for the coloured imps. But to its door occasionally came one or other of the servants with a badly cut finger or a persistent sore, and Roscoe treated them with professional gravity while their hands shook and their eyes rolled as if they would pop out of their heads.

The day after their ride to the woodyard Varna tapped lightly on the door.

"I've brought you a patient," she explained from the

threshold. "He's only a lil' one, but oh so very, very poorly."

For a moment as he held the door open Roscoe could not take his eyes off the girl's face. She had been riding again and the morning air had laid a fresh young bloom like a caress on her cheeks. Her proud head was thrown back and she met his gaze with mischievous eyes. Then she propelled a small black boy into the room, helping him to hop along on one foot while he held the other in a skinny hand.

She settled her skirts about her and sat gracefully on the edge of a chair, holding the frightened child with the gentleness of a mother.

"Oh, he just doesn't know what to *do*," she said in a caressing voice, smiling into the infant's face, "wid a foot dat hurt lak dat, huh? 'Oh ma babby, ma curly headed babby,'" she began to croon, nesting her cool cheek against the child's woolly hair.

Roscoe drew his gaze from her face and looked at his patient.

"Well, little man, what's the trouble?"

The child stared up at him with grave eyes dilated with terror.

"It's his foot," explained Varna, "he's gotten a thorn in it. It serves him right really, because he was chasing his little sister around into the thickets. Timmy's a bad boy except when he's scared, aren't you, Timmy?"

"Ah," said Roscoe in his bedside manner, bending down to examine the foot. But the child tried to draw away.

"What's you gwine a do?" he trilled, rolling his eyes.

"Well now," said Roscoe, smiling at the girl, "I think we can operate at once. What do you think, Miss Varna, shall we cut the leg off above or below the knee?"

The corners of the girl's mouth twitched and her grip suddenly tightened on Timmy's trembling shoulders.

"I should say it would be better, Dr. Torrence, to take the leg off right here," she said seriously, touching the child's hip.

Roscoe looked grave as he turned the foot over and located the trouble. He whipped out his knife and removed the thorn deftly, then he began to feel the edge of the blade, while the boy's eyes followed the movement with paralysed fascination.

"Massa, you ain't gwine a tak ma laig off?" he wailed, struggling in Varna's grip.

But Roscoe, avoiding the girl's eyes, continued to look grave.

"Trouble is, Timmy," he said significantly, "you've been a bad boy chasing your little sister around. And a little bird told me you tied a can to poor old Rufus's tail." He shook his head. "You know, Timmy, that was a very wicked thing to do, and the good Lord has made your foot go bad just to punish you. It ought to be cut off right there as Miss Varna says—"

"But, Missie Varna, Ah ain't done nuffin'bad." Timmy's eyes looked up into the girl's face with tears running down. "Please, Missie Varna, doan' let'm tak mah laig off. Sho' Ah'll nevah chase Minnie agin' an'," he gulped, "an'—an'—Ah'll nevah steal another cookie 'long's Ah live, fo' sho' Ah woan'—"

"Well, we'll see how good a piccaninny you are, Timmy, for the next day or so," said Roscoe with a kindly smile, opening a jar and handing the child a candy, "and maybe we shan't have to cut off the leg after all."

The little black hand closed over the coloured sugar and, like an animal released from a trap, Timmy tore himself from the girl's hands and bolted through the door, hopping and skipping on the still painful foot.

Varna turned, laughing, and their eyes met. For a moment they looked at one another, Roscoe absently

twisting the thorn between finger and thumb, the girl with one hand raised to her breast the other resting on the back of the chair. Then the colour mounted to her cheeks and her eyes dropped. For an instant longer Roscoe stared at her, noting as though for the first time her long lashes that curled above her cheeks, the brilliant tints in her hair as the light from the window fell on it and merged the coppery streaks into pure gold, and his eye traced the exquisite curve of her neck where it swept into her lovely shoulders. The scent from her hair rose in his nostrils and seemed to fill the room with her radiance. For a while they stood thus, while his eyes rested on her and the desire rose within him to take her in his arms and crush her to him. It was so long since he had held a woman thus that the thought made the back of his throat go dry. Then like a discordant note crashing through the strains of a symphony the voice of reason broke upon his dreams. He recalled with a start who she was: his host's daughter, barely twenty, and he, a guest. . . .

A little glint of mischief came into his eyes and his mouth began to twitch. He put his hand suddenly under her chin and lifted her face. She was taken by surprise and did not resist.

"Young lady," he said with professional gravity, "from the colour in your cheeks I'm afraid you are sickening for something very serious. Let me see your tongue."

Varna closed her mouth.

"I'm perfectly well, thank you," she said, drawing her face away from his hand. But she did not move.

He caught her wrist between finger and thumb.

"Your pulse is high and you undoubtedly have a temperature," he told her. "Do you see spots in front of your eyes?"

She shook her curls, staring at him.

"Nor hear funny noises in your ears?"

"None, except your questions, suh."

Roscoe shook his head, pursing his lips.

"Ah, it is as I feared. A slight attack of—er—temporal fever. You know, Miss Varna," he added, turning to his row of bottles and watching her reflection in the mirror over the table, "I've seen a great many cases of fever begin like this—quite mild ones, of course, and not very serious, so long as they are taken in time. I'll mix you up some nice physic here."

"Thank you, Dr. Torrence," she said coldly, "pray don't trouble, for I wouldn't dream of taking a drop."

"But my dear young lady," he said, turning round with a bottle of pink liquid in his hand, "you really must do what your doctor advises you. And believe me, you'd be surprised what effect this medicine will have—"

"I have no doubt, suh," said the girl eyeing him, "but I'm perfectly well, and indeed I have no wish to become a patient of yours to-day, thank you."

In the mirror he saw her make a low mock curtsy, lifting the folds of her skirt with graceful hands. For a second or more she remained curtsied and, pulling a hideous face, stuck her tongue out at his back.

Roscoe swung round, taking her by surprise, and before she could regain her poise he caught hold of her shoulders with a firm grip.

"That, my child," he said grinning down at her, "is very naughty. No Southern lady should behave like that. But as I thought, your tongue *is* badly coated and shows the beginnings of a bilious attack."

Varna pulled herself up, her cheeks crimson, her eyes flashing.

"Bilious attack! The ideal! Dr. Torrence, if you don't let me go this instant, I'll. . . .

She tore herself away and swung round, her billowing skirts filling the doorway, her hands grasping them to her, her face twisted into fury.

"I'll never come into this room again," she exclaimed. "Never as long as I live! You've been positively insulting, suh, trying to take advantage of an innocent girl!"

Beyond her in the passage Roscoe caught sight of Katie Lou's face transfixed with astonishment. At the moment he thought nothing of it, but held up the pink bottle with a grin.

"Your doctor's orders, miss," he mocked, with a dangerous twinkle in his eye, "are a half-spoonful of this after meals. It will restore that sense of calm and poise that I fear has deserted you. A whole spoonful will make you so benevolent—"

Varna stamped her foot.

"Oh! Oh, how I *hate* you!" she flared at him, her cheeks crimson and her eyes dancing fire. "Keep out of my sight and don't ever come near me again. I—I detest you!" And with a rustle of skirts she swept from the room almost into the arms of her maid.

"Miss Varna," Roscoe heard Katie Lou say as they continued towards the girl's room, "what dat man do? Can Ah get you de lavender watuh or sump'n fo' yo' po' haid, honey?"

Roscoe began to tidy his small dispensary.

"The trouble with you, my lad," he told himself thoughtfully, "is that you carry your jokes just a little too far." But he could not help chuckling with a curious mixture of satisfaction and admiration at the vision of Varna's fury. "She certainly looks lovely when her eyes are flashing like that," he thought.

CHAPTER XV

WHILE he waited for the *Magnolia Bloom* to make her round trip down to New Orleans, up to Memphis and then back to Vicksburg, Roscoe continued to enjoy an unhurried existence at Lorrimer Hall that had already begun to cast a spell over him. He wondered why he had not joined the *Magnolia* on her present trip down to Orleans; but when he had suggested it at the Big House Miss Deborah had been so insistent that his visit was far, far too brief, and the Colonel had so forcibly refused to hear of it, that he had felt he would only offend these generous and hospitable people by leaving just yet. And life here was so pleasant and different from the hurry and anxiety of his old life at home that he was only too glad to stay a week or so longer. There was something about these people that made him feel as one of themselves; they had a rich, subtle sense of hospitality that seemed to welcome him into their midst and gave him to understand that he was free to do what he liked, to make Lorrimer Hall his home just so long as he wished to stay.

Aunt Debby was always charming to him, and in his talks with the old lady as she sat in her chair overlooking the lawn, slowly rocking while her white hands deftly crocheted, he was surprised to find what a profound knowledge of the world she had. He even remarked on it one day.

"You see, Dr. Torrence," she told him, looking beyond him at the trees bordering the lawn, "sitting here has given me plenty of opportunity to read all my life. If one cannot travel, books are a wonderful substitute. And

maybe I have read a variety of subjects that are not usually considered as suitable for even an old body to read," and she glanced across at him, twinkling.

After her coolness following the surgery room incident Varna forgave Roscoe for teasing her, but her manner towards him never exceeded the polite intercourse of a rigid code. Once or twice he caught her thoughtful gaze on him across the supper table, when her face was partly in shadow cast by the candle shades. She never returned his glance but always dropped her eyes as soon as he looked at her, and the expression in them never gave him any clue to her thoughts. With gentle care he managed to draw her younger sister out of the reserve into which the death of Randolph Anson had cast her. Lucy's gratitude for the understanding he showed her was almost touching, but he on his part never gave her the slightest sign that he realized it. She was a sweet and lovely girl, he thought, and he set out patiently to bring back the merry sparkle to her eyes.

In the afternoon, when the fierce glare of the sun had passed and a cooler breeze came up from the river to rustle the leaves, there were tea parties on the lawn. Coffee and sometimes iced mint tea for the ladies and trays of julep cups for the gentlemen, with sandwiches and cakes, cookies and all kinds of sweet confections that Aunt Mitty's loving hands had prepared, were served by Uncle Ben and the Colonel's butler, Lucullus. Sipping the cold amber fluid in his glass Roscoe conversed with the menfolk while listening intrigued by the lilting voices of the ladies. Afterwards there would be games of croquet and he would have a charming partner whose hoop skirt swept the grass as she made her shot, and there would be a good deal of soft laughter at the absurd course of the ball.

"Really, Dr. Tawnce, I declare, that ball's bewitched!"

"It was a perfectly brilliant shot, Miss Castlemaine."

"La, la! Dr. Tawnce. That wasn't the hoop I was aiming fo' at all!"

Once or twice there were supper parties and the ladies forsook the alpaca basques and chiffon and taffeta of their afternoon dresses for the briefer silks and satins and tulle of the drawing-room. Their voices blended with the soft light of the candles, and their conversation, Roscoe thought, flowed back and forth across the table like music from a distant orchestra. Watching them as he talked to the guests at his side—for in their turn they seemed to enjoy listening to the crisper, more downright accents of the Englishman—he came to the conclusion that nowhere, even in the most select dining-rooms in Mayfair, had he seen so much fresh natural beauty and such exquisite complexions as nearly all these Southern women seemed to have as a birthright. Even his naturally critical gaze as a medical man could detect no sign of anaemia or any of those hidden ills that so often marked the prettiest women a victim to nature's revenge in a doctor's eyes. If these women, he thought, twisting the stem of his wineglass between finger and thumb, had appeared lovely in the light of day at the barbecue, they were lovelier still in the soft light of the candles, and in a surge of gratitude for so much entrancing beauty he lifted his glass to his lips with a silent toast to God's gift to man.

The only thing that annoyed and puzzled him was his own attitude towards Franklyn Duquesne. The dark, good-looking young man was sitting next to Varna and Roscoe watched his animated face, the way he leant towards her, with a slow feeling of repugnance. At the previous day's tea party Franklyn Duquesne had been there and Varna had been his croquet partner. Roscoe recalled now as he saw her flash a brilliant smile at the young fellow, that they had somehow sat near one another most of the time. Perhaps others had noticed it, he thought,

glancing round at the assembly while the lady on his right prattled happily about the beauties of Venice at night where her husband had recently taken her. Duquesne was a very good-looking fellow, half French, with all a Frenchman's vivacity, and from his manner it was easy to see that he could scarcely see any other person in the room except Varna. But was it possible that he was making an impression on Varna herself, thought Roscoe, watching them, that her flashing smile and merry eyes, frequently directed at him, were animated by. . . .

"Good God," he suddenly thought, "what in the name of sanity am I thinking of? Old enough almost to be the girl's father and grudging her choice of a beau!"

He glanced across at Lucy and found her watching him. They exchanged a smile before she dropped her eyes and he listened to his neighbour's description of travelling in Italy, feeling uncomfortable and somewhat ashamed of himself for the remainder of the evening.

Uncle Ben brought him a message from Jake, the woodyard headman, with his morning coffee.

"Dat nigger say dere's a raf' a comin' down de ribber dis mawnin', Mas'r Ross," Ben told him. "And ef'n you gwine see hit he reckon you oughter git 'long fo' mid-day. Will you wear yo' grey pants dis mawnin', Mas'r Ross?"

When he topped the levee by the mill astride of Blaze the raft was being poled into the pool against the shore. Like a floating island it consisted of hundreds of great logs from the forests of Nebraska and the pinewoods of Kentucky, lashed together to form two acres or more of lumber. There were two rough log shanties near the middle and near them a negro cook bent over a great pot simmering over an open fire which was laid on a clay bed.

With whoops and shouts the ragged crew of toughs—"white trash" Roscoe had learned to call them—pushed and laboured with fifteen-foot oars, slowly edging the

great mass in towards the sandy shore. They looked a picturesque gang, these hard drinking hard swearing, hard gambling, shouting, leaping rapscallions, with their unshaven faces and battered felt and straw hats, their brilliant hued shirts and torn pants, and their wild shouts. As they brought their raft in closer out of the main current and worked it gradually into the backwash of the woodyard pool, one of them started a song, and at once the whole gang of a dozen men broke into the strains of:

*The snows are meltin' in Ohio,
The river runs strong with the flood,
From the north the wind it is going to blow
Row with strong arms, boys, row
Down the river
Down the river
Down the river
Way down the O—HE—O!*

"Dar she is, suh," said Jake's husky voice at his elbow. Roscoe turned in his saddle to find the mulatto standing by Blaze, pointing to the raft. "Yes, suh, dar she is. Mo' logs for ole Big Massa's teef and mo' wuk fo' po' ole Jake!"

Watching the men pulling at their long oars Roscoe could not but admire the clever handling of the cumbersome monster. Wild, loud-voiced and blasphemous, these ruffians knew their job, and as he sat the horse and watched he had to admit that this was an aspect of Mississippi life he had not considered much before. Hitherto he had only looked upon these great rafts through the eyes of a steamboat man, regarding them as menaces to navigation sent by the devil to harass pilots. The shanty boats, drifting down mid-channel with never a light showing until the steamboat's bow was nearly atop of them, were bad enough, and he recalled some of Sam Truckee's language on such occasions with

glee; but a raft the size of this one was infinitely worse, even if they did show a dim lantern somewhere about its middle when by rights there should be a bright light at both ends. Thank goodness the old *Magnolia Bloom* had not yet met one of these lumber islands in Dead Injun chute at the bend where the channel just wasn't wide enough for steamboat and raft. And when he remembered San Truckee's telling him that he reckoned most nights these raftsmen got so roaring drunk they forgot to show a light at all, he realized why the steamboat pilots detested them even more than an unexpected fall in the river, and sawyers on a pitch-black night.

As soon as the men had taken ropes ashore and made the raft fast with the logs on its inside edge resting on the strip of yellow sand fringing the levee, they collected around the cook and began their meal. There were toughs from Ohio and way up Wisconsin amongst them, bearded rapscallions from the backwoods of Iowa, and a lantern-jawed fellow from Kentucky. Sitting Blaze with only his head and shoulders above the top of the levee Roscoe listened fascinated by the varied intonations of their voices. While they squatted around the fire and tossed coarse witticisms at each other a fair-haired youth with slow lanky movements got up and began to strum a banjo, beginning to sing in a plaintive voice:

*Oh, I loved a gal with be-yentiful eyes
Hub name was Josephina,
And I thought why honey yew're jest my size
So I said—*

The words were drownéd in a chorus from all the men and a clanking of tin plates on the logs. As the uproar died away the banjo twanged again:

*Oh I loved a gal with rosy lips
Hub name was Josephina—*

Blaze suddenly pricked up his ears as a horse somewhere whinnied and Roscoe turned in his saddle to find Varna and Lucy riding towards the levee on their mares and a man with them astride a handsome chestnut horse. Roscoe cantered towards them waving a greeting, at the same time recognizing the girls' companion as Franklyn Duquesne. He was wearing dark brown breeches and leggings and doffed a slouch hat as Roscoe rode up. The two men bowed, eyeing one another.

"We heard another lumber raft had come in," said Varna, giving Roscoe one of her smiles. She was wearing no hat and her hair glinted with coppery tints where the sun fell on it, while her cheeks looked flushed as though she had been riding hard, although Medusa's coat showed no sign of sweat. "I just can't imagine how they manage those things."

"I've been watching the men sweep her in," Roscoe remarked.

"Do what, Dr. Torrence?" Varna gazed at him with a puzzled expression.

Roscoe laughed showing his white teeth. "I'm sorry, Miss Varna," he said, "I was thinking of the way a Thames bargee would describe it."

"You're too nautical for us," she laughed, "we've never even been on the sea, you know."

"My apologies," he said bowing, "I meant that I was watching them work the raft into the pool with their long oars. They're a picturesque crowd, these raftsmen."

"They're very rough and noisy," remarked Varna as another burst of song and laughter came over the levee. "I've always wanted to listen to them singing, but Papa never let me."

She urged her mare forward, but Duquesne headed her off.

"I think this is near enough," he said firmly. "If we get much closer we might hear what the men are saying,

and—uh—I don't think their songs are quite fit for ladies' ears."

Roscoe glanced at Varna's face and back at Duquesne. The girl looked petulant, as though she resented the captain's action. Her lips were pursed and there was a challenging light in her eyes.

"But it's their songs I *want* to hear!" she exclaimed, edging Medusa's head past the chestnut's flank.

Duquesne avoided Roscoe's gaze.

"I was only thinking of what words you might hear," he told her gently.

"So was I," she mocked, tossing back her curls and breaking into a canter towards the levee.

"Oh, Varna!" Lucy's voice betrayed her dismay as her eyes followed her sister. "Really, I declare. What do *you* think, Dr. Torrence?" she asked, turning round eyes on him. "Aren't they terribly rough and coarse men?"

Roscoe controlled the corners of his mouth and shot a glance at Duquesne. The young man's gaze was riveted on Varna's retreating figure.

"I really don't think those men are singing anything to bring a blush to a lady's cheek," Roscoe said with mock gravity.

Lucy looked relieved.

"Oh then, in that case"—her eyes suddenly sparkled as she smiled at him—"maybe we can go a little nearer. Do you know, Dr. Torrence," she added in a confidential tone as the three of them followed Varna's mare to the foot of the levee, "I've always wanted to ride down the river on a raft. Can you *imagine* a girl wanting that? But I do.. It must be such fun being a man and being able to do things like that. I often wish I were a man so that I could go and do something *wild*."

Roscoe stared. If Varna had said that he would have understood, for Varna gave him the impression that her high spirits chafed at the restrictions that surrounded

these charming Southern girls; but Lucy. . . . While he looked at her slight figure sitting the mare so easily in her well-fitting riding habit he began to wonder whether, after all, behind those innocent blue eyes and that round childish face there was not just as adventurous a spirit as ever leapt challenging from her elder sister's face.

Varna's mare was atop the levee when they caught her up, and the four of them stood together looking down on the raft.

"Oh they've stopped," she exclaimed in a disappointed voice as the singing suddenly died away. "Have they seen us?"

As she spoke however the men on the raft jumped to their feet and began to whoop and dance. Waving their hats they pointed and gesticulated up the river, while two or three of them broke into a grotesque dance, leaping about the raft like madmen. Across the water came distant strains of music.

"Oh, oh look," cried Lucy, pointing excitedly, "it's the show boat!"

They could now see a strange craft coming slowly down the river. Part of it was like a large flat barge with a huge white painted shed built on it, not unlike the clapboard smokehouse that stood by the field-hands' cabins. This was being pushed by a small sternwheel steamboat whose bows seemed to be urging the great ark along like a sheepdog driving an elephant. As the unwieldy looking craft came closer the notes from the steam calliope separated themselves into a somewhat asthmatic rendering of "Annie Laurie", while along the roof of the house in great red letters they could read the words JUDAH HUSKINS' FLOATING THEATER.

A series of short wails on the steamboat's whistle punctuated the music as the two craft swept past the woodyard, and their echoes were greeted by a burst of

excited voices from the mill-hands. They had all left their work and were grouped on the levee watching the show-boat. The engine was still chuffing merrily and the big saw whirring with a quiet windy moan, but none of them was paying any attention to the machinery. Several of the younger negroes began to dance up and down throwing their hats into the air, whooping and chattering with delight. And suddenly their voices rose, softly at first, and swelled into volume on the notes of a song, as they danced and clapped their hands to the rhythm of the chant:

"Dar she is! Dar she gwine! De showboat am come to town. Way fellows, let's follow de showboat! Count yo' money, save yo' cents, fo' de showboat am come to town!"

"Is she going to stop at the landing?" asked Roscoe watching the boats glide past a rippling shoal.

"Why, yes indeed," replied Lucy, her eyes shining; "they'll give a perfo'mance this evening fo' sure."

Roscoe's face broke into one of his slow smiles.

"The kind of show a lady could go to?"

"Why, of course," Lucy replied, glancing at him inquiringly.

"Then let's go," he said crisply.

Lucy clapped her hands with excitement.

"Oh I'd love to!" she exclaimed, "wouldn't you, Varna dear? That is," she turned to Roscoe, "if Papa doesn't object."

"He won't," he told her with finality.

"I'm sure Aunt Debby won't mind," said Varna without conviction.

Duquesne leant forward in his saddle.

"If you will permit me, Miss Varna," he said bowing, "I'd feel greatly honoured to be your escort." His dark eyes left her face for a fraction of a second, darting a glance at Roscoe, and then returned smiling at the girl.

"Thank you, Captain Duquesne," she said inclining her head, "I shall be more than happy under yo' protection."

Roscoe swallowed and bowed to the younger girl.

"Your servant, Miss Lucy," he said smiling at her.
"May I have the honour?"

Lucy's blue eyes lingered on his upright figure after she had assented to his escort.

As the autumn evening changed from daylight to dusk, and night drew a mist across the sombre distance of the river, there was an excitement, an air of expectancy in all the streets of Vicksburg, along the road back of the levee and in the cabins in the bottom lands. In that occult method by which news is carried far and wide before the white folks hear of it, the darkies had learnt that Huskins' Floating Theatre had come to town. The night for which many of them had put by their nickels and half-cent pieces all summer, storing them in a secret hoard behind the old cooking pots in the corner, had at last arrived. Almost before the lanterns had been hung out along the sides of the showboat, and the calliope had started up again, blaring its steamy notes across the waterfront, negro belles in distant cabins were fingering their best cotton frocks and coloured beaux their treasured striped pants and jackets. And amongst the white folk there were those who would ride into town to make a night of it with the irresistible attraction of the drama to lure them on. Already, before dark had fallen, groups of men and women had craned their necks to read the magic promises of the playbills that had been pasted up only that morning, and crowds collected at street corners to recount the last time the showboat was here.

As the two girls with their male escorts were driven slowly towards the levee in the family hack, Lucy plucked Roscoe's arm:

"Oh look, Dr. Torrence," she cried, her excitement barely controlled. "There's a bill. Can you see what play it's going to be? Can you, Varna?"

Jeff stopped the carriage and Roscoe leant out.

JUDAH HUSKINS' FLOATING THEATER, he saw in large block capitals. (Here followed a tolerable woodcut of the *Maria Huskis*, only with two funnels, whereas the actual towboat had only one, and that not quite straight.) Then he read aloud:

"FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY:

That Magnificent, Stirring, Sobbing, True-to-Life Drama
EVALINA

or

The Sheriff's Daughter

in which the leading part, the English Lord, Lord Montague Dunstanley, is taken by the World Famous Real English Dramatic Actor, Gerald Graham, who has come to America to act in this play straight from Drury Lane Theatre, London. With him plays that Wonderful and Beautiful Actress, Miss Lillie Brocken, of Chicago fame, aided by a famous caste which includes. . . ."

"Oh that will be wonderfull!" Lucy clapped her hands. "Don't you remember it, Varna dear, how in the last scene the dreadful villain meets his desserts by falling between two logs in the river and drowning?"

"Have you all seen it befo'?" Duquesne asked the two girls from his corner of the coach.

"Why yes, Captain Duquesne," said Lucy quickly. "Mr. Huskis showed this play here last autumn, and he gen'lly shows the same play, doesn't he, Varna?"

"The year befo' last, darling, we saw 'Pride befo' the Fall,'" said Varna's rich voice from the shadows of her corner. "That was a perfectly lovely play."

"Oh, but I was too young to go," exclaimed Lucy a

little peeved. "Don't you remember how I cried when Aunt Debby said I couldn't go and Aunt Mitty gave me toffee candy to be good?"

"You behaved like a very spoilt little girl," said her sister severely and Lucy nestled her head against Varna's shoulder.

"But it's going to be such fun to-night," she said, gazing out at the crowded street as the lamps drifted past the window.

Like strings of coloured gems the Japanese paper lanterns hung between poles above the white folks' gangway that led to the showboat's deck. In their soft rays the negroes' eyes flashed white with joy to come as they jostled across their own stage, while the river gurgled darkly beneath, glinting in foamy ripples in the light of the lanterns and passing on, ever on, into the night.

Through the red plush curtains of the doorway Duquesne and Roscoe led the two girls. As he stopped to hold back the folds of the curtain for her, Roscoe thought how radiant Varna looked in the yellow light of the wall lamps. She was wearing a gossamer-like dress of white tulle with wide hoops and about her shoulders a filmy wrap of tulle that she held with one hand against her bosom. Katie Lou had done her mistress's hair in the newest style that was then the rage in New Orleans, with white lace intermingled with curls that fell almost to her shoulders. Roscoe missed a heart beat when she smiled at him and he saw how her coppery curls gleamed with gold in the lamplight. Unconsciously he clenched his fists, experiencing a sudden surge of anger as Duquesne offered her his arm and escorted her to their seat, while Varna bowed to friends in the front row, tossing her curls back when they fell forward. God, what a divine creature she looked, thought Roscoe, momentarily stopping to look at her, so gossamer-like, so slim, so poised and elegant.

He felt a gentle hand slipped through his arm and,

pulling himself together, turned a flashing smile on Lucy as they followed the other two. His white teeth gleamed in his sunburnt face and there was now a merry twinkle in his eyes as he leaned towards her.

"Do you *really* like the theatre, Lucy?" he asked in a low voice, glad to see her eyes bright and cheerful again.

"Oh indeed yes," she answered, smiling up at him. "I just adore it. But you know I've—I've only been once before." She looked around at the rows of faces as a child might look at a roomful of guests. "Oh but isn't it lovely here? Just look at all those beautiful lights, Dr. Torrence."

On their ornamental brass brackets the lamps were arranged elegantly around the walls, while on each of the panels pictures had been painted evidently, Roscoe thought looking at them, by an inebriated artist. They presumably represented scenes from various plays, and by careful study above the heads of the audience one might discern the grim face of Macbeth and in another panel the appropriately leering expression of King Lear. The drama was pictorially displayed in all its forms.

Long before the time given for the curtain to rise the place was packed. From the cane chairs in the front rows, where the Quality sat in the cool dignity of silks and satins, black lace and restless fans between the broad shoulders of their escorts, to the gallery at the back, with its bearded and painted occupants, there was a sea of expectant faces of all kinds and descriptions. Beneath the gallery, and railed off from the back rows of chairs occupied by white people, were the benches for the coloured folk. Roscoe and Lucy amused themselves craning their necks to count the number that had managed to squeeze into this restricted space.

"I declare!" she said with a little laugh, "they just couldn't get another nigger behind that rail. Look at their faces."

"They're packed like sardines," Roscoe remarked. Lucy turned to him.

"Like what, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe's eyes twinkled. "Haven't you ever seen a little sardine? Don't you have—don't you all have," he asked laughing, "sardines in tins, like tiny herrings? You know, about that size?"

As Lucy shook her head, puzzled, a storm of clapping and feet tapping on the bare floor welled up from the back of the audience and reminded them that the curtain was long overdue to rise. Then a thin little man with watery eyes, a sad expression and a moustache so devoid of hope that it drooped like an aged horse's head, began to turn the oil lamps down, one after another along one side of the theatre, until only the glare of the footlights played on the curtain.

The shuffling died away, the hush was intense. There was a pause while nothing happened, and the audience seemed to hold its breath. Then with a series of jerks the curtain rose, and with an audible gasp of delight three hundred pairs of eyes gazed at the interior of the room that was revealed before them.

"That's a mighty purty room," whispered a voice from about the fifteenth row.

"Yeah. *Mighty* purty, I'll say," breathed another.

"Don't seem nobody there yit to me."

"No. When's it goin' a *start*, huh?"

"Ss-sh!" said several voices, and a loud hiccup ruined the silence that followed.

Then two figures appeared from the wings, a bearded man and a young girl in a blue gingham dress. Against the cramped background of window, wall prints, two chairs, a table and a tired-looking sofa, they seemed out of proportion. But that was not to be helped: the stage could not be made any wider than the width of the boat, and the actors could not very well grow smaller. They

just couldn't help looking too big for the room, but nobody in the audience minded a detail like that.

The man looked at the girl with eyes rendered more fierce by the mass of black hair over his face. Unlike a gentleman who has just entered the parlour he still wore his sheriff's slouch hat. The star on his coat confirmed his association with law and order.

"Listen to me, daughter," he said in the sort of voice the river pilots used when passing one another a mile distant, "never speak to me of that other man again! You must obey your father. Either you wed Mr. Leroux or—" he pointed a long arm towards the door painted on the left wall.

The audience lifted a deep-felt sigh at the tearful entreaties that followed from the unhappy Evalina. While Miss Lillie Brocken ("of Chicago fame") was not exactly in her first bloom of youth and her figure might be described as substantial rather than sylph-like, the effect on her audience none the less was moving as she dropped on her knees before her stern father, begging to be spared such a fate. Her golden wig, large blue eyes and shapely bust gave her a touching, *ingénue* appearance that wrung the heart.

Roscoe felt Lucy touch his arm.

"Oh isn't he *horrid* to his own daughtah?" she whispered; but watching the absurd acting of Miss Brocken he wasn't so sure that he didn't sympathize, to a certain extent, with the sheriff.

There followed a slight commotion amongst a rough element to one side of the gallery when an even more repulsive individual appeared from the wings in the shape of the leering Gaspard Leroux himself. With a face like his, adorned as it was with bushy black eyebrows, a reddened nose and black drooping moustachios that he seemed unable to leave alone, it would be difficult to be anything but a villain.

Evalina rose to her feet at the apparition—her chosen husband—and retreated, backing behind the table up left, while, at last remembering to remove his hat and give his matted hair an airing, her cheerless-looking father grasped the villainous planter by the hand.

"Aha, my friend," he bellowed, "you have come just in time."

"Aha," repeated Gaspard; only in a nasty, nasal, once-aboard-the-lugger sort of voice with a leer in the direction of the horrified Evalina. "So I have, have I?" He twirled his black moustachios again, exercising his eyebrows half a dozen times.

"This is an occasion", observed the sheriff, loud enough for any one crowded out on deck to hear, "when a little liquor is called for, eh? I'll go get the bottle," and the nasty old man winked knowingly in the direction of his unhappy daughter.

He had no sooner disappeared through the wings, right, when Gaspard sidled up to the girl, twirling his moustache.

"Aha," he said again between curling lips, if anything in an even more scoundrelly tone than before. "So you are to marry me to-day, eh?" He put his arms around her. She pressed her outstretched hand against his hateful mouth. And screamed.

"So you don't want to kiss me, eh?" the villain asked, leering down into her cringing face. "Aha!"

The audience was mostly leaning forward by now, for this was the Big Moment. A few turned round to see who was interrupting this magnificent drama, as the final villainous "Aha" was echoed once or twice in a husky and uncertain voice from the gallery, followed by a loud hiccup and a ripple of merriment from the coloured benches. But all they could see were the pale blobs of faces in the gallery and the goggling eyes of the black people below. Some one gave a loud "Ss-sh" and in

silence the one-sided love-making on the stage continued, while hearts beat faster along the benches.

Then suddenly a face appeared at the window, right centre, and with scarcely a sound a tall, handsome young fellow in working clothes—rough but singularly clean—stepped into the room taking in the situation at a glance. A murmur of joy went up from the audience at his appearance, for most of them, like the two Quillon sisters, had seen this particular play at least once before.

The *Maria Huskins* did the trip up and down the river at least once every season nearly always showing the same drama, and they knew that this Jim Martin (Gerald Graham, "World Famous English Actor from Drury Lane" etc.) who loved the fair Evalina, would turn out to be none other than Lord Montague Dunstanley, for whom a few hundred thousand pounds and as many acres of parkland waited to be claimed (death of elder brother made possible) in England. Roscoe had some difficulty in suppressing a laugh when the first words of this "real English lord" cut the air with their nasal twang. Like Miss Brocken, Mr. Gerald Graham had evidently become well acclimatized to Chicago and all points east, for he had lost all trace of the accent or mannerisms usually associated with public schools and English gentlemen.

But the young hero was not to get everything his own way. (The audience generally knew this, and most of the ladies told one another in advance. There was a great shuffling and some loud coughing.) His nationally slightly mixed "You scoundrel! By Jove, I'll make you pay for this. Beat it!" was greeted by an even curlier sneer on the hateful Gaspard's face, and while the villain twirled his black moustachios with one hand he released the half-fainting girl with the other and, having a free hand, whipped his pistol out of its holster and levelled it at the astonished hero's abdomen.

"Waal," he snarled. "We'll see who's best man here, huh?"

"No, no," wailed the girl, trying to hold back the bad man's arm. "Don't shoot him! I—I love him!"

The audience sighed. They just loved that bit, for Lillie Brocken certainly could put a powerful lot of feeling in her voice as she faced her tormentor.

At this point in the drama there was a murmuring from the gallery that rose to a concerted shuffling, and a thick voice began to mumble incoherently. The hero, glancing up from the murderous muzzle of the pistol levelled at his waist line suddenly became animated, leapt six feet towards the wings and cried, "Say, look up!" The girl glanced towards the audience with a startled expression, and the next moment a deafening report from the gallery shattered the scene.

Gaspard the villain collapsed in a heap on the stage, while Miss Brocken threw up her hands and emitted a scream that sounded like a real one. With one accord the audience rose to its feet, knocking over the chairs with a clatter, and immediately the first signs of a panic swept along the serried rows like a chill wind. Lucy clutched Roscoe's sleeve and he instinctively put an arm about her shoulders, facing round and trying to see where the shot had come from. A drunken old man in a battered slouch hat was reeling against the gallery rail brandishing a still smoking pistol.

"Got 'im. Got 'im, I did," he called in a thick voice. "Thash put paid to that bash—bashtard. Thash—got 'im."

"Shucks, you old fool," some one shouted, "it's only a play. Sit down," and two or three men tried to wrest the revolver from the old drunk's hand.

The noise from the nigger benches, where black heads were trying to crane forward to see what was happening overhead, drowned the scuffle that began to shake the

flimsy gallery, and when the pistol went again off with its deafening report, shattering one of the windows, pandemonium broke loose. Panic seemed to sweep across the audience, and while the men in the front rows tried to protect their swooning womenfolk the rougher element overturned benches and chairs in a surge for the doorway.

"Oh why *did* that beastly man want to spoil the play," protested Lucy. "It was so good."

Roscoe was tempted to ask whether it was usual for entertainments in this part of the world to end in a shooting affray, for he was reminded of the Anson's barbecue, but there were more pressing matters to attend to just then.

"Keep close to me," he told Lucy, holding her by the arm. He swung around and caught sight of Varna. "You, too," he said, taking her arm. "We'd better not separate." Her arm felt soft and yielding, and he thrilled as his fingers closed around the warm flesh.

Duquesne came closer and bowed with frigid courtesy. "Miss Varna will be safe in my hands, suh," he said as he put Varna's other arm through his own.

The two men looked at one another for a fraction of a second; then the crowd jostled around them and Varna's arm seemed to slip unconsciously out of Roscoe's hold.

"Hadn't we better get out of here?" suggested Lucy, and Roscoe turned to her, his eyes snapping. Then he smiled at her anxious face.

"It's probably best if we stop where we are," he said reassuringly, slipping his arm around her shoulders, as they backed away from the surge of people. It gave him a feeling of relief to be able to hold the girl close like that, aware that she yielded trustfully to the slight pressure of his arm and leant against him, while his eyes sought Varna's face.

But Duquesne had edged the elder girl along the aisle towards the other end of the stage and was evidently

trying to find safety for her in the wings. Roscoe glanced at the stage. The curtain had fallen, but a gap in the centre revealed Miss Brocken and the little man with the dreary moustache trying to lift the figure of Gaspard. Lucy turned and saw it too.

"Oh, Dr. Torrence," she exclaimed, "they'll want a doctor. Hadn't you better—"

Roscoe held her arm. "I must get you out to safety first," he said, "for fear some one else begins shooting. Then I can—"

"No," she said, her face set with sudden determination. "I'll come too. He may be seriously hurt, and I—I think I could help."

Roscoe gave her an appraising look and, slipping his hands under her arms, he lifted her up on to the stage. Leaping up after her he led her behind the curtain. Lucy blanched at the first sight of blood on the dusty boards, but her mouth set and she stooped over the prostrate figure of the ex-villain while the sheriff and the "real English lord" stood aside with the sweat running down the grease paint on their faces.

With her golden wig a little awry, giving her an intoxicated appearance she was far from enjoying just then, Miss Brocken stared at the young girl through tear-stained eyes.

"Who's she?" she asked the man with the dreary moustache, but the manager looked blank.

"I'm a doctor," said Roscoe. "I'd better have a look at the wound."

Miss Brocken and the manager stepped back at the note of authority in his voice, while Roscoe turned over Gaspard's limp form.

"Would you mind?" he asked, appealing to Lucy.

"Oh," she breathed and turned away, colouring.

Roscoe pulled at the man's torn pants and looked at the injury.

"Only a flesh wound, thank goodness," he said. "The bullet probably went into the stage somewhere."

Miss Brocken knelt beside him, her breath coming in gasps.

"God! Is that where he's shot?" she exclaimed. Then she caught the injured man's shoulders and gently shook him. "Jim, Jim. It's Lillie. You ain't killed. Open your eyes, Jim."

The man groaned, but kept his eyes shut.

"I'm shot."

"But, Jim—Jim." Miss Brocken looked helplessly at Roscoe. "It ain't serious, is it doctor? He's my husband."

"No," said Roscoe smiling.

"But I'm shot, I tell you," murmured Jim through clenched teeth. Then he let out a groan and Lillie put her arms about him, sobbing.

"Oh, Jim—Jim, it'll be all right," she cried. "The doctor's here."

Roscoe turned to Lucy.

"Miss Lucy," he said urgently, "would you see if you could get some one to find you a basin of warm water and towels, or a clean tablecloth or linen, for bandages?"

Lucy sent him a look of gratitude and nodded. But the young English lord stepped forward as she turned to go.

"That's all right, lady," Mr. Gerald Graham said in his Chicago accent, "I'll go get anything you want, doc." Even beneath his grease paint he was a good-looking man, and for a moment Roscoe thought the actor reminded him of some one he had met. He noticed Lucy look at the man with a curiously startled expression and then turn away hurriedly, but he had other things to think of just then.

"Jim—Jim," Miss Brocken was crying again as she lifted her husband's head. "Listen, Jim, you're quite all right. The doctor's here and he's going to operate."

"Operate!" Jim sat up with a start and clapped his

hand to his hip. His eyes almost bulged out of his head, his false moustache had got awry, and Roscoe could not suppress a smile at the man's lugubrious appearance.

"You're all right," he told him, still chuckling. "The ball passed through the right buttock, and I can patch you up, so as you'll be about again in a week—even if you can't sit down for a bit longer!"

By the time he had completed his work while Lucy bathed the man's face with cold water the theatre was cleared and all but the few stage lamps had been put out. Roscoe turned to her.

"Thank you for your help, Lucy," he said. "You've been very brave. Your husband will be quite all right now," he added to Miss Brocken. "I'll look in to-morrow afternoon and see how he is."

"I don't know where we'll be," she said despondently. "Cap'n Huskins only booked this pitch for to-night and I guess he'll have to move the boat on somewhere. God knows what we'll do for the show. Nobody can play Letoux like Jim can," she added proudly, and dissolved into tears.

Lucy put an arm about the woman's shoulders.

"It'll be all right, Miss Brocken," she said in her low soft voice. "Dr. Torrence will be sure to be able to help you—and yo' husband." Then when the actress had dried her tears Lucy turned to Roscoe. "Please let's go," she whispered, looking at him with appealing eyes.

Roscoe took her arm gently, for she seemed almost on the verge of tears herself.

"We'll have to find your sister and Captain Duquesne," he said, hurrying her off the stage. Somehow he could not trust himself just then to speak Varna's name. "They're probably waiting outside somewhere. You were so brave, Lucy."

She held his arm closer.

"I—I thought Mr. Graham——"

"The real English lord?"

She nodded. "At first he—he reminded me of—of Randolph Anson," she almost whispered. "I could have swooned."

On an impulse Roscoe put his arm about her shoulders.

"Oh Lucy, I'm sorry," he said. "I see what you mean."

He paused at a loss, then added more brightly: "Now we really must find the other two, and if Captain Duquesne's escorted your sister home, why you'll just have to come home alone with me. Can you trust me?"

Lucy glanced up at him through misty eyes.

"I've always been taught", she murmured, trying to smile, "that an English gentleman is entirely to be trusted with a lady."

CHAPTER XVI

THE emotional turmoil in which he found himself gave Roscoe no peace. It annoyed him to discover that with all his experience of life and the sick, with all his illusions as he thought destroyed by a broken marriage, and his mental and critical faculties apparently still unimpaired, he, Roscoe Dean Torrence, should be rendered ecstatic and unhappy in turn by his love for a nineteen-year-old girl.

"Damnation," he exclaimed to himself over and over again, "I'm old enough to be Varna's father. What the devil's come over me?"

But the use of cold logic and the analysing process of his normal cases proved of no avail in his own. Medical practitioners are notoriously incompetent in treating their own ills, and when the complaint is one of emotion affecting the head and heart, the patient is scarcely in the position to cure himself.

"But it's madness," he told himself, as he sat in his little surgery and drummed his fingers on the table. "It can't go on. I can't take advantage of her father's hospitality and kindness like this. Good God, I'm too old for her, and anyway," he admitted miserably, "she's probably already in love with that blasted Duquesne fellow. The sooner I leave the better."

But the *Magnolia Bloom* was not due to call at the Vicksburg landing for two more days, and in that time Roscoe had to put the best face on the matter he could. He deliberately tried to avoid Varna all next day for fear that his emotion would reveal itself, but when he leaped up

on to Blaze and galloped down to the sawmill, then past the cotton-field out on to the pike that led to the town, letting the wind blow through his stubbly hair and cool his head, he could not shake off thoughts of her in his mind. How she had looked that night as she swept up the aisle to her seat in Huskins' showboat; how she looked when he caught her eye across the candle shades at the dinner table; the merry sparkle in her eyes when she smiled; the lilting tones of her voice, so soft and mellow and musical to his ears, and her entrancing pronunciation of words that he had always heard spoken another way; they were pictures that flitted through his mind as he rode and, filling him with exultation and hope, left him despairing and angry.

If he could only say with some certainty just how Varna felt about him, it would at least tell him where he stood. But although she was ready to talk to him when he sought her out, smiled at him across the table, even flirted mildly with him after she had danced in his arms at one of the parties, yet he could see that she did exactly the same with any of her other partners. And he could not be certain whether it was only his heated imagination that made her reactions to Duquesne's attentions just a little more marked.

He had thought he was through with women, knew too much about them, had seen too many times the results of their cunning wiles and stupid ways; he had thought he was content just to meet them, enjoying their society, their chatter, their pathetic flirtations, to bask in their empty smiles, their air of femininity, and then to—ride on. And here he was racked by love for his host's daughter, whose nineteen years of sheltered, gently nurtured life seemed to have fortified her with infinitely stronger weapons than his thirty-seven of adventurous ones. And he felt he was losing. He wondered whether Lucy guessed how he felt about her sister, and tried to remember whether he had made a fool of himself or given

himself away before the two girls. Somehow he felt he could trust Lucy not to say anything, even if she suspected the turmoil that was affecting him; she was such a gentle, sweet little soul that he knew she would not make it more difficult for him if she knew. He even wondered whether he wouldn't do better to take Lucy into his confidence—like any lover, he yearned to have some one to talk to about his beloved—and reasoned that she would probably be sympathetic and perhaps tell him whether Varna was or was not falling in love with Duquesne. But enough of his native caution remained to dissuade him. He would have to bear the ecstatic despair alone.

It was at least some consolation to have talks on divers subjects with her aunt, for if Miss Deborah had the slightest suspicion of the trend events were taking she never gave Roscoe the least sign. Her conversation was refreshing and unusual for a lady of her age, and he enjoyed her company, for having spent much of her crippled days reading, Aunt Debby's knowledge of natural history and world affairs, of art and literature, astrology and, surprising to him, medicine, was wide and curiously erudite. Behind her steady blue eyes was an active, eager and retentive mind, and there did not seem to be a subject in the world in which she did not show some interest or be ready to learn something new. Watching her square hands, Roscoe noted the space between thumb tip and forefinger and the width between all of her fingers, and saw that it was the hand of a versatile thinker, a hand of action and clear-cut decisions. What a tragedy, he thought, as they talked, that she had been partly crippled nearly all her life.

And yet, he wondered, that had not prevented her running Lorrimer Hall with all its people, its guests and servants and parties and entertainments in a grand and unfaltering manner, as though she had been born to

organize and command. Some of these wives and sisters of Southern gentry, he reflected, carried as much responsibility on their shoulders, and had the lives, the health and the affairs of as many persons, black as well as white, dependent upon their capable management, as many an army officer. It would be so simple to mismanage an establishment like Lorrimer Hall with its dozen or more of servants and stable-hands and children and outhouse boys, in addition to the white folks' family; simple just to let them all run wild and let the Big House take care of itself. But Aunt Deborah had been brought up in a tradition that allowed of no such weakness, the women of the South carried great responsibilities and she managed hers with clever sympathetic discipline.

"If you had been a man, Miss Quillon," he once told her, watching her capable hands, "I imagine you would have been either a very brilliant general, or else a clever surgeon."

"You pay me a great compliment," she said turning her intelligent eyes on him, "but I think, maybe, had I been born a man I should have been an astronomer."

"Of course," said Roscoe, "I'd forgotten your knowledge of the stars."

"You're thinking now", she told him with a deprecating smile, "of my slight indulgence in astrology, not astronomy. Alas, it's a great and fascinating subject, and yet I never seem to have time to get around to master it thoroughly. We all know so little yet about the influences the stars and the planets have on us from the day we are born. Since you told me your own birth date I've gotten out some details that do fit in with what you have told me of your life."

She put on her horn-rimmed spectacles and pulled a sheet of notepaper from a book by her side.

"Then I'm all ears to hear the worst," said Roscoe smiling.

"You will not take it seriously," she said, looking keenly at him. "But I see that you have Cancer rising. That is an upsetting influence; it is a watery sign, you see, and—"

"You mean I ought to be drowned?" His eyes twinkled. "It's quite possible."

"No, no. A watery sign means that you will have one or two emotional experiences of a difficult kind, and you'll know a great deal of frustration, possibly great disappointment. But that will not always last, and having your character—you remember how I told you a Gemini has two natures?—you will persevere where another person would give in."

"You mean I shall eventually get what I want?"

"I can't promise you. But you with your forceful character, your other self as it were, will not let disappointment keep you down. If you want anything and want it hard enough you'll get it in the end, even if it takes the rest of your lifetime to achieve it."

"That sounds hopeful. But supposing by the time I get whatever it is I want, and I find by then I've ceased really to want it, what then?"

She smiled a little sadly.

"That is what happens so often. That is one of the inflictions on humanity."

Roscoe thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "Well, it makes one hopeful at least," he said. "And now, how else will my fortune go?"

Like all men, he thought the subject a joke, but he wanted to hear all Miss Deborah had to tell him nevertheless.

"This isn't fortune telling," she explained, shaking her head. "It only tells you what sort of *character* you have been born with, and how you will be influenced through life because of it. Your sensitive, partly artistic nature will always make you appreciate beauty, romance, even",

she twinkled, "affairs of the heart. While your determined nature, with its assertiveness, its drive, the part of your character that gives you your energy, gives you also persistence, and a love of conquest. This planet that appears to be rising indicates outside influences that may threaten to checkmate your plans, cause obstructions. I'm not clever enough to work out all the possible influences shown in the map."

Thinking over what she had told him Roscoe was bound to admit that Aunt Debby had described his character extraordinarily well, and he wondered just how much was this queer study of astrology and how much intuition or just plain guesswork when she spoke of emotional experiences and frustration.

Going into the library before dinner he found it empty except for Michette and her two remaining kittens. He sat down and lifted Michette on to his knee, touching her softly behind her sharp ears.

"Where's Markus, Michette?" he asked her, looking around for her mate. But the sturdy tabby was not to be seen in the room.

Michette gazed at him vacantly out of saucer-like eyes, in whose yellow depths he read boredom—or it may have been despair. He put a hand under her chin, lifting up the long curved whiskers with his fingers, and began to stroke her silky coat pressing her body downwards.

"Why don't you settle down, Michette?" he demanded invitingly. "Eh, pussy? Relax."

His touch nearly always subdued cats, and he was accustomed to have them fold up into his arms and lie quiet, or settle purring and contented on his knee. But this evening the little grey Persian was not in a relaxing mood. She crouched rigid in his lap, her great eyes fixed beyond him, her tail hanging down below his knee, twitching back and forth.

"What's the matter, Michette?" Roscoe asked gently.

Then he understood. "I know, little Michy. Markus has gone on the spree. Life begins at dusk for an old tom and so he's gone on the prowl and deserted you. And you want your mate. Isn't that what it is?"

She turned her gaze on him, but the stare was vacant, as though he did not exist. Then a sudden patter of soft paws on the floor was followed by a pat against his leg and sharp pins bit into the flesh.

"Oh you little devil!" he exclaimed, jumping, and as the kitten flipped another paw at his mother's bewitching tail, Michette jumped down and began to walk sedately towards the door.

Roscoe watched her, lying back in his chair. The mother cat stopped after a few paces and looked round at him with the same aloof stare, twitching her tail from side to side in electric jerks. Then she walked a little way to the left, and stood with her side against a table leg, mewing pathetically. Her two kittens, both of them a comic mixture of Persian and tabby, with their prettily marked coats, yellow eyes and absurd bushy tails that had not yet grown to their correct length, scampered about in sudden soft-padded rushes.

But Michette took no notice of them. Mewling plaintively, her eyes gazed first at the door, then at the window, and Roscoe in a mood to sympathize with her loneliness, watched her with compassion for the ache in her little heart. She was calling her mate, but he would not come, and Roscoe could imagine Markus at that moment prowling around the plantation after a pair of tempting green eyes.

A grey movement caught his eye beside his chair. One of the kittens had seen his mother's twitching tail. With fixed concentration and hindquarters quivering the little monster crouched. Then with a sudden rush he sprang forward, caught the tail between his paws and turning over on his back, began to kick and bite.

Almost as though she had not noticed the indignity, Michette flicked the end of her tail clear, and moved away, mewing as plaintively as ever. The kitten sprang after her and battled with the maddened tip of his mother's tail with furry paws, while his brother, a flurry of mischief, suddenly sprang on to him from behind.

But the mother cat walked away, crying dismally for her mate who would not come.

Roscoe sat pressing the tips of his fingers together, his mouth pursed in thought. The little scene with the deep grief of the mother running through the clowning of the kittens like the notes of a funeral bell against a song, had suddenly seemed to him to represent so much of life. We were all like Michette, he thought, aching for something that would not come to us, while our acquaintances, our friends, even our own children, like Michette's sons, had no inkling of the grief that was eating deep in our hearts. There was no more true communication between the minds of people, even of people who loved one another, than there was between these kittens and their mother. We all lived in tiny, individual worlds of our own, bounded by our minds, and none knew what was happening, what real joy, real despair was filling the mind of another. Throughout this life on earth, he thought, we should continue to live in isolation, in the solitariness of the spirits. And suddenly he felt the intense loneliness of a stranger in a strange land.

"You sho' got de mos' purty hair, Miss Varna, dat ever Ah see. Ah 'low dey angels ain't got sech purty hair nor dis is."

Katie Lou ran the comb through the girl's tresses and watched the coppery tints dissolve into gold.

"You shouldn't say things like that, Katie Lou," Varna rebuked her, though evidently pleased with the compliment. "It's not right to speak of God's angels like that."

"But Ah doan' mean no hahm, Miss Varna. Ah 'specs dey angels got de mos' beyeutful hair, all gold and silver mebbe, but Ah reckons dis hair dat you got's de bes' and purtiest hair dat any young lady has in de county."

"Do you hear that, darling?" Varna said merrily as Lucy came into the room. "Katie Lou's been paying my hair as good a compliment as ever I've had from any beau!"

Her sister stooped and kissed her.

"Darling, you talk like you've had hundreds," she said laughing softly.

"Ah meant it too, Miss Lucy," protested the maid. "An' dat's more'n what mos' a dem young gennleman c'n say wid dey compements, dassa fac'."

The two sisters exchanged glances and giggled.

"Katie Lou," choked Lucy, "you're a scream! Now are you going to brush my hair to-night, or do I have to do it myself?"

Katie Lou revealed her teeth. "Oh no, Miss Lucy. Ah'll sho' fix yo' hair, honey. Jest lemme fix Miss Varna's fust."

In her deep blue kimono with its long flowered sleeves a present that her father had brought home from Japan, Lucy looked graceful and charming. She had let her hair down—for ever since they had been old enough to have their own bedrooms it had been the custom most nights for her to come into Varna's room last thing to have Katie Lou do her hair, except when some remark had upset Katie Lou and she would not come when they rang the bell—and the thick tresses lay all over her shoulders, making her look little more than a tall, slender child.

She sat on the stool beside her sister and searched her face.

"Varna, darling," she remarked, "you were looking so lovely to-night at dinner. I declare Dr. Tortence couldn't take his eyes off you."

Varna shot a glance at her.

"How you do talk, child," she exclaimed, and lapsed into silence.

"He surely is nice. I just love the way he talks," Lucy went on, running a brush through her hair. "Especially when he tells us what it's like in England. I do hope papa can take us to see England one day. I'd just adore to see a real London fog. I wonder if they all talk that way? Carn't and tomahto and—oh, I love it when he says something's 'Perfectly extraordinary'! I always used to think that Englishmen, when they met, always said 'Haw, haw, my dear chap', but I don't think *he* would, do you, darling?"

"Who, my sweet?"

"Why, Dr. Torrence. I'm sure he's what they call a man's man, and I'm sure he doesn't have much to do with girls——"

"Darling!"

"Well, I mean, he doesn't flirt like—well, like so many of the gentlemen we meet, does he?"

"Really, Lucy, how you prattle. Couldn't you find out the other night after that dreadful show on the boat?"

Lucy coloured violently.

"He—he behaved like a perfect gentleman," she faltered.

"Such a wasted opportunity, darling."

"Varna! Really!" Lucy's eyes opened wide. "And if you hadn't allowed Captain Duquesne to carry you off like that," she exclaimed, "I should never have found myself in such an *awkward* situation!"

"Nor seen where that actor man got shot, darling?"

Lucy jumped to her feet.

"Varna, you're being perfectly horrid to-night," she said, tossing back her tresses, "you know very well I wanted to help. You remember Auntie Debby taught us how to bathe and bandage wounds and I'd never had a

real wound to try it on before. And anyway, Dr. Torrence said I'd been a great assistance, so there!"

She walked over to the window and looked out through a gap in the curtains.

"Is that all he said in the carriage," asked Varna in a bantering drawl, "all the way home?"

Lucy looked at her sister reproachfully.

"Dr. Torrence behaved as any English gentleman would," she said haughtily. "He was telling me about his early cases in hospital when he was first in London."

"Any interesting ones?"

"I don't know what you mean by interesting. But a doctor sees a tragic side of life we'd hardly know anything about."

"And did he only talk about hospital cases?"

"Indeed, no. He's very interested in flowers and trees, and he told me heaps I didn't know about bird life, and animals, and—"

Varna gave a musical laugh.

"Flowers, birds, animals, and their habits? Why, Lucy darling, that's the order in which Aunt Debby imparts what she calls the facts of life. I declare, another mile or more to go and you'd have gotten around to the subject of babies!"

Lucy stamped her foot.

"Varna, how *could* you? I think you're horrid, and I'm going back to my room."

Varna jumped up and caught her sister in her arms.

"Lucy darling, forgive me, I was only joking," she exclaimed and kissed her with her laughing mouth. "Don't be angry with me, please darling."

But Lucy was not to be so easily mollified.

"You're so wicked to say such things," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "You know I'd never even *think* anything like that. And I'm sure Dr. Torrence would be shocked if he heard you. And, indeed, what were *you* and

Captain Duquesne saying when you were sitting together on the front porch before we got home? You were out there a very long time."

Varna looked at her sister intently.

"We were not talking about flowers and birds and animals," she teased, her eyes mysterious.

Lucy shook herself free and walked towards the door. Slender and straight, she looked like a nun in her dark robe with her proud little face framed in the dark aura of her hair.

"If my beau hadn't—been killed," she said tragically from the doorway, "at least I wouldn't be horrid to my own sister. Katie Lou, come into my room to fix my hair."

"Yass, Miss Lucy," The maid rolled her eyes at the elder sister. "Is dat all, Miss Varna?"

"Yes, that's all to-night, Katie Lou," said Varna, turning to her dressing-table mirror. "Go and fix Miss Lucy's hair now."

When the door had closed behind Katie Lou's worried face, Varna leaned over the dressing-table and stared at herself in the mirror. With her hair combed and "fixed" for the night her titian curls, set with their pins, hung down to her shoulders accentuating the oval of her chin and the delicate lobes of her ears; her eyes, sparkling and changeable, looked out at her between curving lashes, and her eyebrows had an arch that ended in the suggestion of an upward twist at their ends that gave her face a provocative—perhaps a promising—expression.

"I was pretty again to-night," she told herself, her lips scarcely moving. "This new hair style suits me, and it doesn't need the lace at the back either. And that green bombazine dress suited me too. Green does suit me. It goes with my hair." She ran her fingers through her curls.

"I must get another dress that's green, too, only a paler green; something light and soft and filmy, like that white

tulle dress I wore to that dreadful showboat. Oh my! What a terrible evening that was—but what fun coming home in Franklyn's hack by ourselves. What *would* Auntie Deb and Papa have said if we hadn't waited on the porch till the doctor and Lucy came home?"

Her eyes were merry now at the thought of that hour—it must have been at least an hour before Lucy and Roscoe had been driven up in the hired hack and found them sitting in the darkness of the verandah. Lucy had looked so horrified when she saw them, and was perfectly horrid and cool to poor Franklyn, but then *she* couldn't say anything after driving home all alone with the doctor, even if he was English and old enough to be her father. Poor Lucy, she always seemed to come in for a dull timel First her beau gets killed—even though it was for her sake and lots of girls would give their eyes to have a duel fought over them—then when she does get left in the hands of a man, it has to be an elderly—well, quite elderly really, and dreadfully well behaved—doctor who just talks of hospital cases and dull and stupid things like that.

Varna laughed quietly to herself.

"Poor Lucy," she thought, "I suppose I really was a beast to her to-night. If I weren't so sleepy I'd go in and make it up. The morning will have to do. But, dear me, the child can't seem to see when a girl's expected to flirt and when she isn't, and it must be disappointing to the men when they find a girl only *wants* to talk about flowers and birds and", her lips smiled, "hospital cases. I declare, I believe she's falling in love with Dr. Torrence. I wonder. . . ."

Her thoughts were interrupted by the door opening quietly and Lucy entering in her white nightgown.

"Oh, Varna, I thought maybe you were asleep." She came into the room, her bare feet silent on the rug, and put her arms about her sister's shoulders. "Darling, I just

felt I couldn't get to sleep after what I said. Please forgive me, Varna. I know I was horrid about you and Fran—Captain Duquesne being on the porch together, but you see I—I was so upset at what you said to me. I'll never be so horrid to you again." There were tears in her eyes as she kissed Varna's mouth.

Varna stroked her sister's hair, watching her own expression in the mirror. It was curious how triumphant her face looked in the uncertain candlelight; really she didn't actually feel triumphant, but she did feel a little relieved, perhaps, that she would not have to go and make it up in Lucy's room in the morning.

"Of course it's all right, darling," she said, kissing Lucy. "Don't let's quarrel."

The two sisters clung to one another for a few minutes longer, murmuring apologies, each deprecating her own actions. Then Varna rose and got into bed. Lucy tucked in the sheets and, kissing her once more, blew out the light. The rays of an almost full moon filtered between the window curtains and formed a streak of pale light on the floor.

Lucy pulled back one of the curtains and looked out.

"Oh Varna," she whispered, her face bathed in moonlight, "it's a perfectly beautiful night. The moon's come out between some clouds and it looks almost as light as day." Then she stood rigid. "Darling," she exclaimed, wondering. "He's—he's out there."

"Who?" Varna lifted her head from the pillow.

"Why, Dr. Torrence." Lucy stared down into the garden. "He's walking across the carriageway towards the arbour."

Varna was silent. Then she whispered: "Maybe he can't sleep. You ought to retire too, now, darling. It's very late."

Lucy hesitated before dropping the curtain back. Then she came over and kissed her sister's forehead once more and disappeared silently towards her own room.

When she had gone Varna lay staring up at the ceiling where a patch of moonlight made shadows on the ornamental work in the plaster. Then she slipped quietly out of bed and went to the window.

The moon hung like a silver lamp in the sky, racing across a sea between two clouds. Her radiance etched the front yard in pools of light and deep shadow, and from her window Varna could clearly make out the sweep of the carriage drive, the magnolia bushes in the centre, the tall cypress trees, like gaunt sentinels in the night, down towards the edge of the swamp, and the open space of the lawn. Not a leaf stirred in the still air; it seemed as though nature slept, but for the drone of the night bugs and the monotonous grunting of the bull-frogs down in the swamp. Her gaze roamed from the grass walks to the deep shadows beneath the trees, while in the distance, beyond the dim line of the levee, lay the broad Mississippi flowing steadily through the night.

Then she saw him. He was standing in the shadow of a live oak at the side of the lawn. She could see no white blob above his square shoulders and presumed he had his back to the house, was standing looking down towards the river. A row of lights was moving slowly upon its surface; he was probably watching the steamboat working up against the current.

For a while Varna stood watching him from behind the curtains. Then she bent close to her mirror and stared at herself in the dim light, pushing her hair back and smoothing it from her forehead. She put her feet into her bedroom slippers and reached for her kimono; then, throwing a silk wrap about her shoulders, she opened her door carefully.

Roscoe paced restlessly up and down his room, all thoughts of undressing and going to bed crowded out of his mind by the mental vision of Varna as she had

looked at dinner. The light of the candles seemed to have illuminated the beautiful colours of her hair, merging their soft tints into the shadows behind her more than he had ever noticed it before. Although she had addressed only one or two remarks to him, he had once surprised her gaze resting on him with a mysterious look in her eyes, as though she wanted to tell him a beautiful secret but dared not speak. Before she had had time to hide her unguarded expression he had held her eyes for an instant, and in that time his heart had leapt in his breast with a surging emotion.

Throughout the rest of the meal Varna had sedulously avoided meeting his ardent look and had talked animatedly and at times incoherently to Aunt Debby and her father, who had been wheeled to the table in his chair by Lucullus. Lucy had helped by chattering almost incessantly to one and the other, and, as he glanced apprehensively around, Roscoe had been relieved to think that no one was aware of the electrically charged atmosphere.

After dinner there had been no opportunity to seek her company, for the Colonel asked Roscoe out on to the verandah for the early autumn night was still and warm as a night in summer. There with the wicker table between them the two men played crap until Lucullus brought them their nightcaps in the form of rum punch. The hope that Varna might come to join them had buoyed Roscoe up at first, but as the night wore on even this hope died, and his play became desultory and thoughtless. The Colonel managed the cards with his uninjured hand and broke in to vent his opinions on Secession.

“What Jeff Davis ought to do”, he said once, slapping a card down, “is to get right away from Washington and its government. We ought to make the South independent, and by God, sir, if we have to fight for that independence, we’ll fight.” And he continued to punctuate his

game with comments on politics that meant nothing to Roscoe just then.

When at length the old English grandfather clock on the stairs struck eleven and Lucullus came to take his master to bed, Roscoe found that Varna had already retired. After a final cigar and a little desultory conversation Roscoe excused himself, and with a dismal feeling of frustration and uncertainty went to his room, where he now ranged restlessly to and fro.

The room was lit only by the light of the moon pouring through the wide open windows, and though he leant for a few moments against the window frame looking out on the stillled garden flooded in the light of the great moon, listening to the hum and drone of the garden life, the chatter of the cicadas, the sounds from the distant town and all the faint noises of night, he was yet unconscious of its beauty or of the spell the Southern night was casting upon his senses.

As he stood there, gazing across the silent garden to the river where the moonlight shimmered on its surface it did not occur to him that this was a night made for lovers, a night when love could flower in young hearts and find repose and warmth, a night that was being wasted where no love was made. At length, however, unable any longer to bear the closeness of his room in the present turbulent state of his emotions, Roscoe heaved a deep sigh and stepping quietly out went down to the garden, where he stood by the lawn, watching a light drifting down the river.

Once he turned and looked up at Varna's window. Of course it was in darkness like the rest of the Big House, a vacant rectangle that hid the desire of his heart. She would be in bed and asleep long ago, he thought . . . or was she? He looked up at the window speculating. Was it possible that she could be aware of the emotions that had charged the air of the dining-room that evening, or

whenever he had been near her? Surely, being a woman, she would be intuitive and guess how he felt. Yet, beyond that one glance she had never given him the slightest hint that she might know his love for her.

Was it all a ghastly mistake? That look he thought he had caught—was it just his imagination, just an hallucination, a trick of the candlelight, brought about by his own feelings? In his own experience he had had to treat other people for hallucinations just like that. It may be that he was now a little bit crazy.

At the thought Roscoe turned despondently towards the river. Then he moved to the shadow of a tree and stood watching the lights of a steamboat slowly making her way up against the current. The faint beat of her paddles echoing across the water stirred his blood and he thought with affection of the *Magnolia*, of how he would soon be aboard her again; but the uncertainty and despair that chained him to Lorrimer Hall broke into his thoughts again and he almost groaned aloud.

How long he remained thus he did not know, but suddenly he was aware that he was no longer alone. As he swung around his incredulous eyes saw Varna coming towards him, silently crossing the moonlit sea of grass. She was in a long dark cloak while about her shoulders a patch of white revealed a filmy wrap; her head was bare and even in the soft light of the moon he could see the sheen on her curls.

He held his breath and his heart nearly stopped. She could not have seen him in the deep shadows of the tree, for she was moving now with faltering steps that would take her beyond the magnolia bushes. He moved and she caught sight of him. She stopped dead in her tracks with a sharp intake of breath. Putting a hand to her throat she glanced back at the house as though to measure the distance between her and safety.

Roscoe took a step forward, both hands unconsciously

outstretched, and then drew back uncertainly, fearful lest any movement of his should cause her to turn and run.

"Varna!" he murmured in an urgent undertone, "don't run away, please. There's nothing to be frightened of. I . . ." Their eyes met in the half-light and he broke off in confusion, almost choked by the uncontrollable leaping of his heart. The atmosphere about them was tense with emotion. No sound came from the house, and even the negro quarters were silent now. All about them the night insects kept up their continuous drone, the garden seemed to be alive with a busy unseen world, and scarcely a plant or blade of grass was free from the chirruping and murmuring life.

"I couldn't sleep," she whispered, searching his face, "it was so hot in the house and the moon made my room so light." He saw her turn her head. "How beautiful it is. I so love the garden in the moonlight. When I can't sleep I sometimes come out here. . . ."

He moved towards her.

"But the negroes?" he murmured, watching her intently.

"It's all right really," she replied in the same low voice. "They are quiet to-night. I wouldn't dare come out alone if any one was about."

"Would you rather I left you?" he asked with ill-concealed reluctance. "God knows, it would be hard for me to do so."

She shook her head.

"No, stay with me a little while."

Unconsciously they moved to the old seat under the tree. Varna sat down and motioned Roscoe to sit beside her, but he flung himself on the grass at her feet and, catching her hand in his, pressed burning lips to her palm in a swift instinctive movement. Her hand was soft and yielding and she gave no sign that she had even felt the contact.

He looked up into her eyes. They were watching him, like unfathomable pools in the darkness, calm and mysterious.

"God sent you here in answer to my prayer," he began in a low, compelling voice. "I couldn't think of sleep after the way you looked at me to-night. You've been constantly in my thoughts ever since I came here with Uncle Ben, and to-night my longing for you drove me out here to . . . to . . . oh, just to pray that you might understand how I feel, and come to me."

His voice trailed away, and she made a slight movement as though to withdraw her hand; but Roscoe held it tightly with so hard a grip that it hurt her.

"You must listen to me, and don't try to take your hand away," he continued urgently. "I won't harm you. You can spare me just your hand, can't you? It is all of you that I may ever have. Varna. Oh Varna," his voice trembled as he pronounced her name, "I have loved you ever since I first saw you. Do you remember? When we were bringing your father home and Lucy ran down to the carriage and you stood—I saw you standing on those steps there looking—oh looking like something divine, angelic. I've tried—God knows I've tried hard enough—to keep my love for you under control, tried even not to let you know it. Our lives have been so different, our ages. . . ." Wearily he ran his hand through his hair. "Oh God, how could I keep my love a secret? How could I see you every day, across the table, in the library, in the garden, ride with you, talk to you—and yet hide from you my heart? To-night at dinner when you looked at me there was a different expression in your eyes. It went to my heart and I've been crazy all evening. Oh Varna, I must know what you feel about me, if you even feel anything at all." Roscoe lowered his head and asked humbly: "Do you think you . . . could you love me . . . a little?"

She put her cool hand on his head feeling for the first time the short curly hair that resisted her touch.

"I don't know," she faltered barely above a whisper. "I—I sometimes think. . . . You see I do like you, Roscoe. But I know so little about love."

His heart leapt at the sound of his own name on her lips and he caught both her hands in his and, rising from the ground, dropped into the seat beside her. He had been so fearful lest the declaration of his love would be met with angry scorn and a rebuff that the relief to his feelings was already too much for his overworked self-restraint. In one movement he had seized her in his arms and was fiercely kissing her lips, her eyes and her hair, as though he could never be satisfied, and marvelling that she yielded.

"Oh my darling, my adored Varna. . . . Oh God, I can't believe it's true. So you love me a little?" he murmured in a torrent of emotion and relief.

Varna lay passive in his arms astonished at the passion in his kisses and troubled by her own rising emotions, though she gave no outward indication save the quickening of her breathing. Roscoe's heart was pounding so that it shook his whole body and Varna could still hear it when presently he loosed hold of her and, drawing a little away, said apologetically:

"Forgive me, darling. I shouldn't have kissed you like that, but I couldn't help myself. I adore you so. You are not too angry with me, are you, my sweet? Please say you're not angry with me. I couldn't bear that. I've been so unhappy for so long."

Varna's warm nature was deeply stirred by Roscoe's pleading and her woman's instinct told her that he spoke the truth that his life had not been an easy or a happy one since he had come to love her. It pleased her, too, to find this reserved Englishman every bit as ardent and poetic in his declaration of love as any Southern beau.

She looked at him in a new light and, laying her head gently on his arm, said:

"No, I'm not mad at you. I think I understand a little. But you see . . . it has been so entirely unexpected I just don't know what to say. . . ."

He caught her arms again in a hard grip.

"Say you love me. Varna! Look at me. Just say you love me."

She lifted her eyes to his as though she were pleading. Her red lips fell apart and her face looked softened, even childish, with a child's uncertainty of something new and unexpected. In her previous flirtations she had never quite felt the emotion that was surging up in her breast at this moment, and she scarcely trusted herself to speak.

Roscoe's eyes burnt into her own and he shook her gently.

"Darling, darling. What's the matter. Don't you love me?"

The look of agony that clouded his face for a moment wrung the confession from her lips.

"I—I think I do—a little," she murmured. Further words were stopped by the fierceness of his kisses and she gasped for breath as her lips were forced apart under the pressure of his own.

"Oh my darling," he exclaimed at last when he had released her. "I'm so happy. And now, my sweet one, when will you marry me? For that's what you're going to do, you know. Next week—Saturday—to-morrow?"

Varna sat up, brushing back the curls from the side of her face, her eyes opened wide. She was not used to being rushed like this.

"Oh my! Can't we keep our secret to ourselves a little longer? What a hurry you're in."

Roscoe chuckled a little grimly.

"I most certainly am," he told her. "I'm going to speak to your father to-morrow."

"No. Please don't." Varna laid her hand on his arm. "Please, Roscoe. You must give me time to think it over. I—I really couldn't be married all of a sudden like that. A girl, you know, just doesn't like being married that way, and there'd be the bridesmaids to think of and their dresses and—"

"I'm sorry, my beloved, I forgot." Roscoe sounded full of contrition. "It's stupid of me, but I want you so much I can't bear to be parted from you an hour longer than we can help, and I know I shan't have any peace till you're my wife. Listen then, my sweet. I've got to go down to New Orleans in the *Magnolia* about a company that's going to be formed. She'll be calling to-morrow or the next day. And when I come up again from New Orleans I'll speak to your father and we can announce our betrothal."

Varna glanced at him with an almost amused expression.

"But if Papa won't consent?"

Roscoe snorted.

"He certainly will. Or by God I'll carry you off."

She laughed then, a low musical laugh that thrilled him through and through and made him want to crush her in his arms again, but she held up her hand.

"You're an impatient man, aren't you?"

"Yes, very."

"But Roscoe—you do see why it would be better to wait a little while first, don't you?"

He still hesitated. In his mind's eye he suddenly saw Franklyn Duquesne and longed to ask her about him, but put the idea away as being unworthy of him.

"Well, yes darling. It'll be as you wish; though you'll be kind to me, won't you? You won't keep me waiting too long? It's more than flesh and blood can bear to be so near to you and yet not have the right to tell the world you belong to me." He held her face between the

palms of his hands and kissed her again. Her lips yielded and she remained still, with her eyes closed and her face in repose.

"How beautiful you look, my darling," he whispered, holding her face close to his. "You have all the radiance of the sunshine in your hair, and the moonlight in your sweet face; its pure serenity, but not—no never its coldness. You must never be cold to me, Varna, that is the greatest blow love can suffer. I'll be so gentle and patient with you while I teach you to love me and want me as I love and long for you." He brought his lips close to her. "Do you know what love means to a man, Varna? Do you *understand*?"

She opened her eyes and he saw they were clouded.

"I've had beaux and flirtations," she admitted hesitantly. "But of course I've never felt about any one as I have—about you. Yes, I—I think I do understand a little . . ." and she turned away while the blood mounted to her cheeks. Such a subject to mention to a gentleman, and he not yet even her betrothed!

The false shame engendered of a strict ethic so overcame Varna that she rose hastily to her feet, and pulling the wrap about her throat said hurriedly: "I must go back now. I'm becoming chilled and, besides, some one might see us here from the house. Good night, dear Roscoe."

Concerned at once for her feelings, Roscoe rose and caught her hand. Pressing it to his lips he bade her good night. Her fingers slipped through his, and long after she had returned silently to the house he remained standing in the darkness of the oak tree his heart beating with the memory of her lips on his own.

CHAPTER XVII

"I'll say it's mighty good to have you aboard with us again," said Captain Hickman, eyeing Roscoe up and down. "But you ain't growed any since I saw you last, Ross," and the old man slapped his thigh and broke into a cackle.

"I'm long enough as it is," said Roscoe stretching out his legs.

"Well, you'll want something to keep your strength up," said the Captain. "What's it to be, a julep or a rum punch?"

Roscoe shook his head. "I'll have coffee, thanks."

Captain Hickman took a step back against his desk and stared.

"Say, you're not feelin' sick, are you?" he asked solicitously. "You ain't feverish or anything?"

"No, Hickey," said Roscoe grinning, "but I'm not drinking just now. I'd prefer a strong cup of coffee if you'd ring for Ben."

"So you're laying off the liquor, eh?" exclaimed the old man pulling the bell-chord. "Well, well, well, if that don't beat creation. Maybe you're savin' up till we hit New Awlins, eh? That'll be fine with me. Why, ever since you landed at Vicksburg I been that lonesome I ain't touched a drop, myself. Well, hardly a drop," he added with an elaborate wink as he opened a decanter.

Uncle Ben appeared in the cabin doorway with an expression of pained disapproval on his face.

"Yass, Mas'r Ross? Is you rung fo' me?"

"Yes, you old scoundrel, I want a strong black coffee. How're you feeling now? Right as rain?"

Uncle Ben pressed his hand against his stomach and shook his head solemnly.

"Ah doan' know 'bout de rain, Mas'r Ross," he said, "but Ah still feel lak Ah swallered a thunderstorm."

"Well, you'll feel as fit as a fiddle in an hour," Roscoe said, grinning broadly. "There's nothing like a river trip to put the bowels in order."

When the old negro had gone he turned to the Captain.

"Ben had got to like being at Colonel Quillon's place so much," he explained, "that when I told him we were joining the *Magnolia* to-day he suddenly discovered he had a 'mighty bad ache in de hinside'. The old fool reckoned I wouldn't go, or maybe I could get along without him, for I know he doesn't like being aboard a steamboat. But I mixed him a strong black dose and made him take it, and", he leaned back smiling, "if he wasn't a sick nigger before he's been a mighty sorry one since!"

"Niggers are like a freight of monkeys," said Captain Hickman. "They'll think up any goshdarn excuse to get out of doin' something they don't have a mind to. Did I ever tell you about that gang of darkies we shipped aboard one trip at Greenville?"

"No," said Roscoe. "But you're going to tell me how this trip's going. What freight have we got aboard?"

Old Hickey looked disappointed. "All right, remind me to tell you about them niggers another time." Then his eyes lit up. "My, but freights are booming on the river right now! We've run pretty near plumb full every trip since you went ashore, and we're full this trip right down to New Awlins. I calc'late we cleared six thousand dollars last trip. What d'you know about that, eh? Look, here's the manifests for the last three trips up and down," and he drew the papers out of a drawer in his desk.

For an hour or more the two partners sat in the Captain's cabin working out profit and loss figures and discussing plans, while the old steamboat wheezed and thudded down river between the Louisiana and Mississippi shores.

Roscoe had not felt so buoyant and full of life for years, and from the moment he had stepped on the *Magnolia*'s deck at the Vicksburg landing he had gone around greeting Old Hickey, Sam Truckee, his two cub pilots, Mac the chief engineer, and all his other acquaintances amongst the officers and stewards as though he had been parted from them for years instead of a few weeks.

"The Doc looks like he's discovered gold," remarked Sam Truckee after Roscoe had left the wheelhouse.

"Yeah," replied Joe Stevens, the cub who was on duty. "Maybe he's found some guy that'll buy this old crate off of him."

"You hold your lip," exclaimed the pilot, swinging round. "Don't you talk that way about the *Magnolia*. Why, you ain't fit to steer a raft, let alone a steamboat. You need watchin' like a new-born brat."

Joe gave his chief a backward glance and shifted his chew from one cheek to the other. Truth to tell he hadn't learnt to chew tobacco properly yet and he wished Mr. Truckee would leave the wheelhouse so that he could get rid of the plug without incurring his chief's sarcastic comments. But they were heading for a difficult chute with a sharp bend around Davis Island looming up off the larboard bow, and he knew Mr. Truckee would stand by to help him with the wheel and, as he put it, "larn him how to run that chute till he could do it with his eyes blindfolded", so he'd just have to go right on chewing.

Although he had been even more reluctant than Uncle Ben to leave Lorrimer Hall, Roscoe trod the *Magnolia*'s

decks with light-hearted pleasure. Thoughts of Varna quickened his pulse and had given him a fresh appreciation of life, while the memory of her sweet face, her laughing lips and the merry expression in her eyes as she had said good-bye to him remained with him to delight and tantalize. He wanted only to get to New Orleans, fix this business over buying Mark Sayer's two boats, and get back to Lorrimer as quickly as possible. He was afraid that every hour spent away from her was going to drag, but he realized that with the business he had to get through in the city he could not hope to be back at the Quillon home for at least three weeks. He could write though. By God, he could write. She had told him that Katie Lou would smuggle any letters to her so that no one else in the household would know. He'd mail a letter to her, he thought, when they called at Natchez. He chuckled aloud then. "My God, how American I'm becoming thinking of *mailing* letters!"

He had been more than satisfied with the progress made by the Colonel. Although the break in the leg had been a fairly straightforward matter needing only manipulative care and then time to set, he knew the burns had been a very different thing. The Colonel's heart was not in any too good a state, but he had refrained from mentioning his discovery to him; the knowledge of valvular weakness of the heart was usually best kept from the patient. Fortunately in every other way the Colonel had a fine constitution—he was, Roscoe reflected, a fine man altogether and a type that he could not help admiring—and he had stood the shock and the pain of the dressings with splendid courage. Roscoe recalled his parting words inviting him to come back before long and to stop over again at the Hall, where the old planter assured him he would always be a very welcome and much honoured guest, with a certain ironical pleasure: he wondered whether the Colonel would have been quite so hospitable

and insistent were he to know of his tacit engagement to his daughter.

He wondered too whether Lucy had intuitively guessed how matters stood between Roscoe and her sister, or whether Varna had not been able to refrain from telling her. After all, he could not see any real reason to keep the whole thing secret. Why, he wanted to shout his joy from the Texas deck and have all these passengers know that he was going to marry the most lovely girl in all Mississippi. But from the soft look in Lucy's eyes when he said good-bye and the way her hand seemed to linger in his, almost as if she had been trying to convey a message to him, he felt that she had guessed the truth and was happy for her sister's and perhaps his own sakes. She was a sweet child, he reflected, and it certainly had been tragic for the poor girl when Randolph Anson had got himself shot on her behalf. He would be going to one or two of those fashionable shops on Royal Street, between Bienville and St. Louis Streets, when he got to New Orleans, to buy Varna's ring, and he would have to get Lucy some nice present that would bring back the sparkle in the poor child's eyes.

That night Roscoe wanted more than ever to be alone with his thoughts and when he had finished the elaborate Southern dinner in the main saloon and managed to escape from a garrulous tourist from northern Illinois, he went up to the Texas deck and leant on the rail aft. The moon had just risen above the dim line of the Mississippi shore, and, as she sailed into the sky, her track felt its way across the water, a creeping finger of golden light that writhed and twisted on its way.

Not a breath of air seemed to stir the silent river, and the *Magnolia* plodded on with the smoke from her chimneys rising in a cloud overhead against the purple sky. The stars, magnified by the stillness of the Southern night

till they looked like the crystal drops of a chandelier, hung motionless in the heavens and mocked their own reflections in the water. Every now and then a shower of sparks would pour upward from one of the chimneys, for a space lighting up the smoke with a ruddy glow, and then fall in a graceful arc into the wake astern, like the spent tail of a rocket. The rapid thudding of the paddle floats, the rhythmic scend and throb of the engines, the breathing of steam through the 'scape pipes and the steady hiss of the wake were the only sounds that broke the stillness.

No other boat appeared to be on this stretch of river to-night and not a light moved except the dim glow of a lantern in someraftsman's tent far away to starboard. It was a night of peacefulness, when the world and its cities could be forgotten, when the path of the waters was so unlimited and the stars above so remote that one seemed to be floating in space. Even the passengers pacing the hurricane deck below were quiet, their voices and laughter subdued by the glory of the scene, while the notes of the piano in the saloon below scarcely penetrated Roscoe's ears as he rested his chin in his hands, and his elbows on the rail, gazing out over the water. Even though below the Texas deck the boat was a blaze of yellow lights, where he stood there was not a light to be seen. When he turned around and faced forward, leaning with his back against the rail, he could see the pilot-house in complete darkness with the figure of the pilot just discernible as a silhouette against the upper half of the wheel.

There was a mournful beauty on the river to-night that at first oppressed Roscoe with a feeling of loneliness. It was as if the scene were so exquisite, so ethereal that man and his mechanical inventions trespassed on the face of the earth.

"Beautiful and peaceful now, Old River," he thought, gazing out across the tranquil water, "but what a devil

you can be at flood time. What a mighty raging torrent you are then, sweeping trees and animals and peoples' homes before you. You are lovely to-night, but I've no illusions about you when you are angry," and he laughed softly, thinking how lovely and peaceful Varna would look to-night if only she were here beside him.

He thought how her soft, low voice would melt into the darkness and thrill him with its music, and how they would stand thus, talking in whispers, while the stars moved across the heavens and the world would be forgotten. He imagined her face bathed in the calm light of the moon and how she would turn her deep smiling eyes on him and fill him with longing. It would not be very long, he told himself, gripping the rail impulsively with his hands, it would not be so very long before she became his wife. The thought of having her all to himself, of being able to feel that she was to be near him, not only for a few hours, nor even days, but for all time, that he would have her to care for, to protect, to please in a thousand little ways, fired him with a joyous anticipation. It would buoy him up, he felt, during the next few weeks in New Orleans when he would need all his business faculties and acumen to carry out the plans he had in mind.

"I know we shall be happy," he said almost aloud as he drank in the cool air with deep, satisfying breaths. "If I made a mistake last time I know that Varna was made for me, and I for her. I'll make her the happiest wife in the world."

He could feel the throb of the engines coming through his arms, and with the upwelling of love for Varna a wave of affection came over him for this old steamboat, and he patted the rail with a warm hand.

"Dear old *Magnolia*," he said so that none could hear. "You shall bring my bride and me down to New Orleans for our honeymoon, and I hope the nights will be like this."

His eyes traced the corrugations of white paddle waves that followed in the vessel's wake and he noticed that the boat was taking a sharp turn. The figure in the dim pilot-house was checking her now, climbing up the spokes of the wheel and dragging them down. The *Magnolia* was heading in towards a bluff where clumps of trees seemed to overhang the water like watchful sentinels, and there appeared no line where the cliffs ended and the river began.

"I remember that bluff," he thought, peering into the shadows under the trees. "We're in Sycamore Bend. Sam Truckee pointed it out as the place where the *Marcelle* got wrecked—killed herself, as he says, in a rainstorm. That's the place under that headland where he says there's a reef, only you can't see it now. I hope the old *Magnolia* never leaves her old bones on a reef."

Thinking affectionately of her he realized how a sailor may come to love a ship more than a woman; how he would learn to love her for her varying moods in storm and calm, their escapes together from wreck and disaster, even for the regular beating of her powerful heart. For such is the fascination of ships, whether as clouds of beauty they sail the seas, or as stately steamboats they ply great rivers, a man must believe that a ship has a soul, a precious entity of her own, that only dies with her when her bones are left to rot in the graveyard of ships. To the sailor women may be unfaithful, breaking hearts as lightly as they eat candies, but his ship is true to him, ever ready to face death with him if need be. A ship can become a goddess in a sailor's eyes, demanding of him his utmost service, yet filling him with courage and admiration for her. From the fickleness of women he may look to his ship for comfort and the confirmation of his manhood.

"But Varna won't change," said Roscoe to himself as his thoughts raced on, "my darling won't be fickle with

me. Our love for each other is too great, too precious."

He suddenly realized it must be getting late, for but a few miles down around the next bend they would be blowing for the Natchez landing. But though it may be late—he had left his massive watch in his cabin and could only guess the time—he was too contented up here on the Texas deck to want to turn in just yet. He watched the moon track come astern. It was a streak of silver now, for the moon had sailed high up into the sky until her face was as pale as a lily, and as her reflection passed into the steamboat's wake it danced frenziedly, sparkling like jewels.

"I must show Varna that," he thought, "she'll love it."

Within three weeks of his arrival in New Orleans the Telegraph Steam Packet Company was formed, and Roscoe, as chief shareholder, became President.

"This is realizing an old ambition," he told his two partners as they sat around the table in Warner's office on Canal Street. "Although at present we have only three boats, I'm looking forward to the time when we are operating the biggest fleet of fast steamboats on the entire Mississippi. And with that goal in view," he held up his hand with a meaning expression, "I'd like to make a proposal right now: that our old friend Captain Hickman here be promoted to the rank of Commodore and take over the command of the *Telegraph*. What do you say, David?"

"Fine idea," agreed Warner with a quick smile.

But their other partner only stared at Roscoe with his eyebrows lifted to their full extent.

"Aw shucks, Roscoe," exclaimed Captain Hickman deprecatingly, "I'd rather stop aboard my old *Magnolia*. Why, I'd never hear the last of it from Martha if I gave up the old boat."

"But the *Telegraph*'s a much finer boat, Hickey," Roscoe

pointed out, "and sooner or later we'll have to scrap the *Magnolia*. She's twenty years old now, and she'll either drop her bottom out or explode her boilers one of these days. Don't you worry about Mrs. Hickman. You wait till she sees the *Telegraph* with all that fine gilt work, and hears that you're now Commodore of the Line."

"I don't cut no figure for a commodore," protested the old man, with a doubtful shake of his head.

"But you will pretty soon," said Roscoe with a twinkle; "a few more inches on the waist line and a little more gold braid, and you'll look every inch a commodore! Why," he added extravagantly, "I'm even thinking of sending to Gieves of London for an Admiral's uniform with epaulettes myself—only I'd never know whether to wear the cocked hat fore-and-aft or athwartships."

"Aw now, for land's sake be serious," cried Old Hickey nearly helpless with laughter. "Leave that be for the moment and let's settle these points about pilots and crews for these other boats."

The acquisition at the auction on the waterfront of the two remaining Sayers packets had given the partners plenty to do. The *Telegraph*, as Roscoe had said, was a fine boat with all the most up-to-date luxuries within her ornamented and gilded interior. The cost of building her added to some sharp dealing on the part of one of the agents and some general mismanagement of funds had brought Mark Sayers pretty low. The bursting of the *Cotton Queen's* boilers had been the final cause of liquidation, and it was rumoured that Sayers had cleared out with what he could lay hands on and gone into railroads. As one man's misfortune is generally another's opportunity Roscoe, Captain Hickman and David Warner had not been slow to buy up the bankrupt stock, and the *Telegraph* Line was the result.

The second steamboat, *Tidewater*, was only a small sternwheeler, even less impressive than the old *Magnolia*,

but she fulfilled her purpose of working way up the Red River with her shoal draught to plantation landings that would never see one of the bigger sidewheel boats except during the dangerous weeks of high water.

Down the waterfront with Warner, Roscoe looked at the double phalanx of steamboats, two miles or more of them, with a swelling pride within him. Nowhere else in the world, he reflected, would he see such a sight as that; no other port—London, Liverpool, Southampton, New York, Boston, Marseilles, Hamburg—no other port in the world would have such a fleet of active steamboats milling against its quays. The smell of them, the din of their whistles and bells and the roar of steam escaping, and above it all the medley of sounds from excited passengers, bawling mates and laughing, chanting negro stevedores, filled him with a strange excitement. It was impossible to count them, he thought, as he ran his eye along the forest of chimneys and jackstaffs and verges staffs and pilot-houses and waving flags: there must be hundreds of them here right now. And he, he was partner of three of these packets, he was part of the scene.

"I reckon there must be nearly two thousand steam-boats operating on the Mississippi," Warner remarked as he followed Roscoe's gaze. "Ever since this city recovered from the last plague in '53—that's six years ago, isn't it?—the traffic on this river's been booming. There's more boats being built than I've known it since I came out here. This is indeed a land of opportunity, Torrence. Do you ever wish you hadn't left England?"

Roscoe turned to him with a thoughtful expression.

"When I think of how I slaved in my practice in London," he said slowly, "and now what satisfaction I get out of being part of this"—he waved his arm towards the quays—"I wonder I never thought of a life like this before. And then at other times," he went on in a lower tone, so that Warner could scarcely hear him above the

general din, "when I think of conditions in the London hospitals, of the unnecessary suffering of the sick, I sometimes get a feeling that I'm—well, avoiding a duty, that I ought to go back."

Warner laughed. "Hell, what good can one man do anywhere in the world for all the folks who are suffering?" he asked logically. "There're plenty of sick people in Orleans—my God, you should have been here during the plague—and if you feel like working for suffering humanity, why there's a dozen streets in this city I could take you to and show you hopeless cases, if you want cheering up."

Roscoe shook his head with a trace of bitterness.

"I'd hate it," he confessed, "as I really hated it in London hospitals. But I stuck it then because it seemed like a duty to me, a duty to help other folk. I suppose it's my crass nature—to want to see life and enjoy it to the full one minute, and then to feel I ought to sacrifice any pleasure in order to help some suffering person the next. That's the trouble, it's a conflict between two different natures, and it just doesn't give me any real peace." He looked at the rows of steamboats once more, and moved off. "Come on, Warner," he said with a sudden decision, "let's drink to success of the Company."

The business of forming the company, employing new crews for the *Telegraph* and *Tidewater*, and the hundred and one things to be done before the two boats could begin running again, kept Roscoe in New Orleans longer than he had anticipated, and by the time he had stepped off the *Magnolia*'s stage on to the landing with Uncle Ben following behind with his two carpet bags, Roscoe was thirsting for a glimpse of Varna. The first weeks of autumn had laid green fingers over the bottom lands, while in the garden and under the trees the grass was already carpeted with the first layer of red-brown leaves.

The magnolia bushes were no longer decked with great clusters of white petals, the dark green of the leaves had taken on the sombre shadows of autumn. The enervating heat of the summer afternoons was gone; the air was cooler with almost a hint of crispness, and breathing it deeply, Roscoe stepped out along the carriageway towards the front porch with a feeling of elation.

"Lawd," panted Uncle Ben shifting the heavier of the bags on to his shoulder with a deep sigh, "looks lak Mas'r Ross'm in a mighty hurry. 'Specs he jest cain't wait to see dat Miss Varna agin, an' aftuh sendin' all dem letters too. Looks lak he'm plumb crazy 'bout dat white gal. Reckon he'm more crazy 'bout dat gal nor what she'm 'bout him. Dassa fac'."

Aunt Mitty greeted Roscoe at the door in a white starched dress and bandana.

"Lawd a muss'y, Mas'r Ross, if hit ain't good to have you heah again," she exclaimed in her throaty voice, wiping her fat hands on her apron and showing him into the reception room. "Mas'r John sho will be right glad to see you."

Outside the door her eye fell on the perspiring Ben. "Huh," she said in an undertone, "reckon t'warn't be long 'fore you'd come back, you good fo' nuthin' nigger. Been kinda peaceful heah aftuh yo' gone."

Uncle Ben mutilated the lower half of his face with a knowing grin. "Ah done brung you a gif' f'om New Awlins," he murmured, watching her expression. "Sump'n you'll sho' look mighty purty in."

"Huh," she snorted sailing past him, "you 'temptin' to buy me off wid one of dem yaller gals' hats?" Then she paused, seeing Ben's crestfallen expression. "Mebbe Ah'll look at what you got. Mebbe Ah 'preciate what you done." She lowered her voice, glancing slyly at him. "Is you hongry, nigger? Dey's some griddle cakes Ah fixed fo' you; reckon mebbe you'd come hongry."

Varna found him in the anteroom, her eyes bright. She was wearing a dark green velvet dress with wide hoops and a demure square cut-collar trimmed with white lace that set off the flaming colours in her hair like a rose above a lily pond.

"Oh Varna, my beloved," was all he said as he caught her in his arms and lifted her off her feet with joy.

"Put me down," she gasped at last, laughing. "Oh please, Roscoe. Papa's coming!"

"Good," said Roscoe setting her down again. "I want to talk to your father."

"Oh no, not yet." She instinctively touched his arm. "Please wait a little longer so's I can . . ."

Roscoe caught her shoulders between his hands and held her rigid eyeing her with an intense look. His lips parted showing his even white teeth.

"Yes," he said nodding, "you've still got the sunshine in your hair, and I'm still hopelessly in love with you. I've been weeks away from you and it's made me feel years older. I've waited long enough, young lady," he added in a determined undertone. "I'll speak to the Colonel to-night."

Her frightened eyes searched his face. "Oh but . . ."

She broke off and they stood apart, adopting unsuccessfully casual attitudes as the door opened and Colonel Quillon came into the room on two sticks.

"Well, well, we're mighty glad to have you here again, Torrence," he said cordially leaving one of the sticks against a cane chair and extending his hand. "You see I'm learning to walk again? Haven't had to do that for over sixty years!" His smile became affectionate as he turned to his daughter. "So this young lady found you, eh?" he said indulgently, stroking her hair. "Well, now, Miss, maybe you better go tell Aunt Deborah Dr. Torrence has arrived. I expect Miss Lucy is with her right now, reading to her. The ladies", he added, turning to

Roscoe, "will be having tea shortly but if you'd like something stronger to fortify you before joining them, I'll have Lucullus bring you a julep or anything else you'd prefer. I expect you'll like to get fixed first. You know where your room is. And", his face broke into a slow smile, "we've not touched the surgery at all."

Tea in Aunt Debby's parlour was a pleasantly entertaining interlude after the rush and bustle of New Orleans business life. Lucy greeted him with a warm clasp of the hand, and a tender expression that lingered in her eyes as he was introduced to a third young lady.

"Dr. Torrence, of London, England," Aunt Debby was saying, "this is Cousin Stella, Miss Fairfax."

Roscoe found himself bowing to a handsome girl of perhaps twenty with a merry round face, friendly grey eyes and a head of attractive auburn hair. She was an inch or so shorter than either of the Quillon sisters, but with broader shoulders and, Roscoe noted with professional approval, a waist that was not nearly so tightly laced (he would have to tell Varna about tight lacing when they were married, he thought). As she smiled her lips parted over slightly protruding front teeth that gave her a simple expression belied by the intelligence in her eyes.

"I guess I've been hearing about you, Dr. Torrence," she said smiling, and he was at once struck by her crisp nasal accent. After the slow soft voices of the others, Miss Fairfax's speech seemed to fall in the room like a discord. He looked at her with interest.

"Nothing defamatory to my character I hope," he parried.

"Oh no, on the contrary," she said stressing the middle syllable. "Cousin Lucy's been telling me how you saved her pap's life. Gee, that was mighty smart, swimming back from that burning steamboat with the Colonel like that."

"Swimming?" Roscoe looked round at the others helplessly, and saw Lucy's face colouring with embarrassment.

"Miss Fairfax comes from way up in Connecticut," said Aunt Debby coming to the rescue. "She's the daughter of my own cousin with whom I stayed when I went to school in Hartford. And it must be three years since you stayed with us last, isn't it, Stella darling?"

While they all talked and sipped their coffee—for although this was called afternoon tea they drank only coffee, but mint tea would have been served if any one had preferred it—Roscoe watched the three girls with interest. He could scarcely prevent himself from looking all the time at Varna's animated face and the high lights playing in her hair, and he had to suppress an urge to get up and take her in his arms, she looked so lovely with the deep green sheen of her dress moulded to her bosom. But he found Stella Fairfax's nasal voice and quick manner so entirely different from the gracious demeanour of the two sisters that he could not help studying her when he knew no one was watching him. She was so self-assured, so downright in her voice if not so much in her opinions, that he got the impression that there was a certain amount of unconscious rivalry between the cousins. Well, he thought, it was just like one's relatives all over the world; but he had not realized how different was the outlook, the speech, and even the attitude towards the most trivial subjects that revealed themselves in the conversation between Northern girls and Southerners.

Lucy he thought was unusually quiet to-day, for as a rule she talked more than anybody. She sat next to Aunt Debby in a becoming afternoon dress of pale lavender with a simple flowered hem and lace frilled cuffs, putting in a word only every now and then. Glancing at her once, Roscoe found her eyes on him with a strange

expression in their depths, but she immediately dropped them and began to ask her Yankee cousin about the autumn fashions in New York.

"Gee, they're going to be right smart this fall, darling," said Stella in her terrible accent, "I didn't have time to look around *all* the shops, for Pap was in such a hurry to get to the depot, but I noticed sleeves are to be shorter, and the skirt's going to be gathered up around the hem like this, and—oh, I *must* tell you, I saw the most heavenly. . . ."

Lucy, Roscoe thought, was not looking too well, she looked pale, and although she was listening politely her face did not reflect the animated enthusiasm of her cousin's interest. He wondered whether she was still fretting over the death of young Randolph Anson. It seemed a pity that the sweet child should have had to face a tragedy so soon in life, and a greater pity that no other young blood had come forward to claim her attention. Unless, he speculated glancing at her as the idea occurred to him, unless she was keeping the young men away from the house, trying to cling to the memory of her lost beau. Young girls do sometimes do that, he thought, and gradually go into a decline. It was just a state of induced melancholia that was difficult to cure if it went too far, and if he saw any further signs of it in Lucy he decided he would have a little quiet talk with her and even suggest to her father that she be taken for a trip down to New Orleans before the winter set in just to lift her out of herself.

He was disappointed in not being able to see Varna alone for the rest of the evening. He dressed with special care for dinner, shaving for the second time that day so as to remove the dark shadow from his chin, while leaving the fashionable "side pieces" half-way down his cheeks. He had bought new clothes in New Orleans and wore a velveteen dinner jacket cut in the English style that he

knew suited him. The presence of Varna stimulated his thoughts, and at table he talked as eloquently as any one, amused at the variety of accents amongst such a small gathering. Varna was particularly animated and talked most of the time to Cousin Stella and her father. Only once was Roscoe able to catch Varna's eye, and then try as he might he could not read the expression he saw there. Thinking of it, he unconsciously ground up the bread on his plate between his fingers and decided that as soon as he and the Colonel were alone in the library he would clinch this matter.

"By the way, John," said Aunt Debby, suddenly, "did you know that Caligula has been locked up in the city jail?"

"No, my dear," said the Colonel. "How did you know?"

"Lucullus told me. You know he and Caligula are half-brothers."

"Then why didn't he tell *me*?" he demanded. "What's that fool nigger been up to now? He had no right to be in the city at all."

"I think he was—they apparently found him—he had been drinking," she ended with embarrassment.

"A few weeks in jail'll do him good," remarked the Colonel grimly, "it'll cool his head."

"But we really need him in the smokehouse," said Aunt Debby with a sigh. "He knows all about the hams and Larkie can't manage the curing all by himself. You see, Dr. Torrence," she added turning to him, "when you've got coloured servants you really have to look after them like children. And sometimes they can be most annoying."

"I can well believe it," Roscoe agreed. "They're a big responsibility."

"The marshal will probably try him and pass sentence to-morrow. We really don't want him locked up even if you think it would do him good, John."

"Well, I can't go and get that fool nigger out on bail, can I?" the Colonel demanded with an amused smile.

"Why no, John dear." Aunt Debby assured him. "Of course you couldn't with your—" she nearly said leg but hurriedly added "injury."

"But surely, Papa," Varna broke in with her eager voice, "we could go and see the marshal ourselves. We can't have poor Uncle Cal locked up, can we?"

"You?" Her father stared as though she had uttered a gentlemanly oath. "What's come over you, Miss. The idea. A young lady going to a magistrate about a nigger!"

"But, Papa," Varna protested, unabashed, "if Lucy and Stella and I went, and Dr. Torrence escorted us—"

"I should be charmed to do anything to help," said Roscoe returning the smile she gave him with a beating heart.

"I think Varna's right, Papa," said Lucy. "We ought to do something to save poor Uncle Cal. I'm sure he's not done anything they accuse him of," she added, turning her great blue eyes on Roscoe while the others smiled.

"It sounds a fine idea to me," said Stella enthusiastically, "I'm just dying to see one of your Southern courts in action."

"And we could all explain to the marshal that it was just a mistake," added Lucy earnestly. "Poor Uncle Cal's so sweet, I can't believe he'd do such a thing."

"Oh Lucy, you little innocent!" exclaimed her sister, laughing. "So you see, Papa, if we all go and talk to the marshal I'm sure we could persuade him to let Uncle Cal go free."

The Colonel looked at his daughter with amusement in his eyes.

"I wish I could come and hear you pleading your case, Varna," he said, and catching Aunt Debby's eye across the table burst into a hearty laugh. "'Pon my soul, Miss, you'd make a good Portia!"

"Indeed, Papa? And what may that be?" asked Varna, puzzled.

"You should read your Shakespeare more carefully, my dear," he bantered.

"Then we can go?" she continued, her face eager.

"Well, I suppose so," said her father reluctantly, "if Dr. Torrence doesn't have any objections." And as Roscoe made it quite clear that nothing would give him more pleasure than to escort the three young ladies to the court room, it was settled that they would take the coach into Vicksburg in the morning.

"We'll be having quite a house party next week," said Aunt Debby changing the subject, "really the first since the Colonel's accident. The Reverend Mr. Pollock and his dear wife are coming to stay with us, and I expect Captain Duquesne will be here fo' part of the time too." Roscoe saw her dart a look at Varna and he glanced at her, tense and watchful. But Varna turned to her cousin as though she had not heard her aunt's remark and continued a conversation on hair styles. Had some change come over her since he had gone down to New Orleans? Was she really the same girl who had clung to him and kissed him so warmly that night out in the garden? By God, this wouldn't do; he'd have to find out. It was some few moments before Roscoe could bring his attention back to what Miss Deborah was saying.

After dinner the ladies retired to the drawing-room for an hour's needlework and talk, expecting the gentlemen to join them later, while one or other of the girls played and sang and Aunt Debby crocheted. At ten o'clock precisely the tall figure of Lucullus with his coal-black face surmounting a spotless white collar appeared in the doorway.

"De gennlemen's still in de lib'ry, Miss Deb'rah," he announced in a deep voice between gleaming teeth. "Will you all want anything else to-night?"

"Not to-night, Lucullus," said Aunt Debby, laying down her crochet work and completing the nightly formula. "See all the doors are bolted, and then you may retire."

Lucullus bowed from the hips.

"Yas, Miss Deb'rah," he murmured and closed the door quietly, while the girls began to put away their work for the night.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the quiet of the library the two men sat over a game of crap. Along one of the walls was a set of English hunting prints with their gay splashes of red, their green hedgerows and their flying horses with legs rigidly outstretched, while on the opposite wall, as though presenting the American scene was a collection of the later Currier and Ives prints. Roscoe liked contrasting the two, reaping a rich thrill from the familiar countryside scenes in the hunting prints, while he found a fascination in the snow scenes, the log cabins, the fantastic-looking train in the "Night Mail" picture, and the fine drawing of the Mississippi steamboat amongst the Currier and Ives collection. One side of the room was lined with shelves, and although they were well filled with books on almost every subject under the sun he had not yet managed to settle down to read his way through them.

To-night he had made no pretence at intending to play for long. Indeed, he had broached the subject of paramount importance in his heart before the Colonel had played two hands. His host was sitting back gazing into the amber lights in his glass with a faintly amused expression on his lined face.

"I can't say I see any real objection to an alliance between England and the Southern States," he drawled, with a twinkle shining out between half-closed lids. "There's never any knowing what's in a young girl's heart, and I suppose her father is just about the last to know anyway. Now I'd had a certain anxiety that it would be the gallant Captain Duquesne who'd be coming

to talk to me. But—" he added as Roscoe seemed about to speak, "I've no doubt that my daughter knows her own mind. Maybe she's learned to appreciate an English gen'leman," he smiled whimsically "more than those we already have around here. I'm not forgetting what you did for me, sir, nor the way you got this leg of mine fixed. And as I see no reason to be disappointed at my daughter's choice, I reckon, Torrence—why, I reckon, I'll just have to be calling you Roscoe, my son, mighty soon."

"And I'd like it to be soon," said Roscoe quickly. "The Rev. Pollock's coming here to stay next week, isn't he, sir?"

"Why yes, sure enough he is."

"Well, sir, I'd like to have your permission to be married here by Mr. Pollock."

The Colonel stroked his goatee slowly.

"That's kind of hurrying it a little, isn't it?" he observed.

"Well sir, I really can't see any valid reason for waiting any longer, with a parson right here, so to speak," said Roscoe with a short laugh, "and if I may speak for Miss Varna, I think she would be more than agreeable."

"I see. I see." The old man's eyes twinkled as he looked at his glass. "That's the way it is, eh? Well, sir, I hardly expected a wedding at my house this year, but I'm pretty certain Mr. Pollock'll be pleased to officiate."

Roscoe rose, an eager light in his eyes.

"If you'll forgive me, sir," he said bowing, "I'd like to find Miss Varna right now."

Long after Aunt Debby and the other three girls had retired for the night Varna sat before the mirror of her dressing-table. She had removed the light silk wrap which she had flung about her shoulders on leaving the sitting-room, and now her fingers plucked mechanically at its embroidered edge. The face that stared back at her in the

mirror to-night wore a troubled expression, and her eyes looked bewildered and unhappy, as though she were trying to avoid coming to an inevitable decision. It was an expression that was foreign to Varna Quillon, one that she would not let others see, and she started involuntarily as her maid entered the room.

"Oh Katie Lou, don't come in," she said sharply, "I'm not ready for you yet. Go fix Miss Lucy's hair in her room first."

"Yass, Miss Varna," said the coloured girl, hesitating in the doorway.

"Go along now, don't stand there gaping!" Varna exclaimed impatiently.

Katie Lou closed the door. "Miss Varna ain't sartin' which way she gwine a jump," she said to herself as she entered Lucy's room. "Dese yer white gals jes' cain't make up dey minds 'bout de men, dassa fac'."

When the girl had gone Varna felt along the side of the dressing-table and, opening a secret drawer, drew out two letters. They were both written on the same pale lavender notepaper with the address in silver at the top, and the handwriting was the same. She read each of the notes through carefully, her eyes softening when she came to the signature with its flourishing capital F and the curious twist to the final yn.

Then she folded the sheets carefully with a deep sigh.

"My, oh my," she exclaimed, looking at herself in the mirror with troubled eyes, "what is a girl to do? I've been a flirt and had lots of beaux, but they've none of them been quite so *irresistible* before."

A knock on the door startled her and she instinctively stuffed the letters inside her bosom as Katie Lou's face appeared again in the doorway.

"What's it this time?" demanded Varna her reserve almost gone.

"Miss Varna, ma'am, Mas'r Tawnce ask ef he c'n speak

to you." Katie Lou regarded her mistress with a sympathetic expression. "Ah reckon hit's mighty impo'tant," she added hopefully.

"When I need your opinion I'll ask for it," said Varna testily. "Where is he—where is Dr. Torrence?"

"In de lil' room. He say c'n he——"

"Tell him," Varna hesitated, "tell Dr. Torrence that I've retired to my room. I've a slight headache."

Katie Lou's eyes looked accusing.

"Is dat de trufe, Miss Varna?" she asked significantly. Varna turned to her table and removed one of her hairpins.

"Go along, Katie Lou. I'm not feeling well to-night."

But the girl still hesitated in the doorway.

"Miss Varna," she said lowering her voice. "Dat ain't de trufe 'bout yo' haid. You knows hit ain't. Ah cain't tell Mas'r Tawnce what ain't de trufe."

Varna swung round sharply.

"Do as you're told, Katie Lou. How dare you question what I say like that!"

"Yas'm. Yass, Miss Varna," said the girl looking appealingly at the exasperated figure of her young mistress. "Po' Miss Varna," she thought, closing the door, "she jes' ain't gotten no mind what she gwine a do, and dere's dat nice gennlem'n wid de funny speech jes' a dyin' to tell her how much he love her. Ef dat don't show dese yer white folks is plumb crazy——"

"Katie Lou!"

The girl started at Varna's muffled voice. She turned and found her mistress holding her door ajar and whispering through the narrow opening. Even so Varna could not hide the excitement in her voice, nor drown the beating of her heart.

"Tell him I'm not in my room. Tell him—listen carefully, Katie Lou—say you think I must be out on the gallery."

Then she closed the door on Katie Lou's understanding smile and a few minutes later, when the girl entered Varna's bedroom ostensibly to lay the bedcovers back and put out her mistress's nightdress, she was gratified to see through a chink in the curtains the figure of Mas'r Torrence climb over the wrought-iron rail and envelope her mistress in his arms. She watched them cling to one another, as they stood together on the verandah with the Southern night beyond them, then as she turned her attention to preparing her mistress's bed a slow smile spread over her black face, revealing her teeth and trembling in little ripples of mirth to her pink finger-tips.

"Dat's a mighty purty sight," she chuckled gladly. "Ah reckon Miss Varna got no mind to think about Mas'r Franklyn right now. When you lay yo' lil' haid on dis yer pillow to-night, honey," she added, smoothing down the white sheets, "you sho is gwine a have mighty good dreams. But dat's on'y kase you's a white gal and he'm a white gennlem'n. A nigger gal's got mo' sense nor dat: a nigger gal wouldn't let her man go'way again. No m'm. Hit jes' shows de white folks is right plumb crazy."

Varna awoke after what seemed but a few minutes. She had that feeling that something, some sound had wakened her, and she lay for a moment looking into the darkness of her room and listening intently. It seemed but a moment before that she had been in Roscoe's arms out there on the gallery, and she pressed the tips of her fingers to her mouth, still feeling the warm imprint of his lips.

There it was again. A gentle tap, tap on the window pane. She felt the colour mounting to her face, and her heart beats began to sound in her ears. Just imagine coming back to a lady's bedroom window at this hour of the night—whatever the hour was. Did he expect her to get up and come to him *undressed*? The ideal! It may, for all she knew, be an old English custom for a man to come

to his betrothed's window at night, but really, twice the same night and after such a long and tender farewell kiss before, was something no real gentleman—well, no Southern gentleman—would do; the man must be entirely crazy. Amongst her beaux she hardly knew one who would ever dream of climbing right up on to her verandah at dead of night and awakening her like this. Hardly one, except—well, maybe that nice Carlyon boy with the dark curly hair and those burning, intense eyes, maybe he would have come once—she would never have allowed a second time—but just once. He had been a terribly hot-headed boy and ready for any wild adventure. It was too bad he had to go away North so soon. But she hadn't realized Roscoe was like that. He was masterful, and when he kissed her she seemed to lose her self-possession and all the strength went out of her, but she had never suspected he might behave like any hot-blooded youth of eighteen. Even his coming the first time to see her, climbing up the ironwork of the gallery columns, had taken her completely by surprise. She had scarcely expected he would do that on getting Katie Lou's message. And there he was again outside her room, tapping on her window. The ideal!

She turned over carefully so as not to make the mattress creak. Really she *couldn't* go and open the window to him—in her night clothes too—although the memory of his warm kisses induced a curious wave of excitement in her. She had never been aroused like this before by any of her beaux, and although she found herself longing for the strength of his arms again and the hot, tender, masterful pressure of his lips on hers, she resented being made to feel so strongly about it all, as though she were no longer mistress of herself. But she realized she just couldn't go out to him now; she would just have to let him go on tapping on the window.

And he did. And it was almost unconsciously that she

found herself, with her kimono hurriedly slipped on, quietly opening the door. Her heart pounded against her ribs and a curious restriction choked her throat as she faced the tall figure in the darkness of the gallery. Then she gasped.

"Franklyn!"

He caught her shoulders with such a grip that she almost cried aloud.

"Yes, I know, I ought not to be here. I ought not to have woken you like this." He stood there, a head taller than she, gripping her slim shoulders like a vice and peering closely into her face, trying to read what lay behind her startled eyes. She could feel his dark eyes burning into her soul, and for the first time she began to be afraid. "I know it's crazy of me to come to you like this," he continued in a fierce constrained whisper. "But I had to. I had to. Oh Varna, my sweet one, I couldn't sleep to-night. I couldn't rest. I've been crazy all day, all to-night, thinking about you, dreaming of your eyes, your hair, the beautiful expression in your face, your lovely white neck—My precious, I was just crazy to come and see you."

She made no movement, standing against the half-open door of the french window, her shoulders gripped in his powerful hands, his hot breath on her cheek, and a strong feeling of lassitude stealing over her, sapping her will-power and leaving her weak and helpless.

"Don't you understand how I feel, how madly I love you?" Slowly he slipped his hands around her shoulders until he had folded her in his arms, and now he held her to him, bending over her and whispering in her ear. "Oh my darling, say you love me. Just say you love me. While I hold you in my arms I feel like I'm in heaven, and I would always be in heaven with you by my side. Varna, Varna, I adore you! For pity's sake say you love me, say you'll be my wife."

His arms tightened about her and his lips found hers.

Under their urgent pressure her own parted and her head was forced back. She could feel the strength draining from her body and it was only the pressure of his arms that held her up.

"Varna, my angel," he continued, his lips close to her ear. "You must come with me. You must come *now*. I've ridden over on Rapide. He'll take us both to the railroad. There's a train for New Orleans at six. You—you will come?"

With a despairing effort she twisted her face to one side while he kissed her cheek, her ear, her neck, hungrily, savagely, as though nothing would stop him. She brought her hands up and pressed them against his chest.

"No. No," she gasped, turning her face farther away from his kisses. "Franklyn! You mustn't."

And suddenly he had ceased to kiss her. He held her a little away from him, his eyes burning into her own, while his breath came in quick urgent gasps.

"You do not love me?" In his incredulous voice she detected the faint French accent of his father. "You don't want to marry me? Varna——"

He held her thus staring at her in the darkness while their hearts beat wildly and she trembled in his arms.

"Oh Franklyn, don't. I can't bear it. Please, oh please leave me be."

"But Varna, I can't let you go. I love you. I can't go away without you. You're mine, my heart tells me that, you're my destiny just as much like I'm yours and I cannot live another day without you. If you come with me now we shall be so happy—oh so wonderfully happy together—just you and I."

"But I can't. Oh Franklyn, don't you understand——"

"Why? Varna." He gripped her arms and held her until their faces nearly touched. "Don't torture me like this. Tell me why."

"I—because I——"

found herself, with her kimono hurriedly slipped on, quietly opening the door. Her heart pounded against her ribs and a curious restriction choked her throat as she faced the tall figure in the darkness of the gallery. Then she gasped.

"Franklyn!"

He caught her shoulders with such a grip that she almost cried aloud.

"Yes, I know, I ought not to be here. I ought not to have woken you like this." He stood there, a head taller than she, gripping her slim shoulders like a vice and peering closely into her face, trying to read what lay behind her startled eyes. She could feel his dark eyes burning into her soul, and for the first time she began to be afraid. "I know it's crazy of me to come to you like this," he continued in a fierce constrained whisper. "But I had to. I had to. Oh Varna, my sweet one, I couldn't sleep to-night. I couldn't rest. I've been crazy all day, all to-night, thinking about you, dreaming of your eyes, your hair, the beautiful expression in your face, your lovely white neck—My precious, I was just crazy to come and see you."

She made no movement, standing against the half-open door of the french window, her shoulders gripped in his powerful hands, his hot breath on her cheek, and a strong feeling of lassitude stealing over her, sapping her will-power and leaving her weak and helpless.

"Don't you understand how I feel, how madly I love you?" Slowly he slipped his hands around her shoulders until he had folded her in his arms, and now he held her to him, bending over her and whispering in her ear. "Oh my darling, say you love me. Just say you love me. While I hold you in my arms I feel like I'm in heaven, and I would always be in heaven with you by my side. Varna, Varna, I adore you! For pity's sake say you love me, say you'll be my wife."

His arms tightened about her and his lips found hers.

Under their urgent pressure her own parted and her head was forced back. She could feel the strength draining from her body and it was only the pressure of his arms that held her up.

"Varna, my angel," he continued, his lips close to her ear. "You must come with me. You must come *now*. I've ridden over on Rapide. He'll take us both to the railroad. There's a train for New Orleans at six. You—you will come?"

With a despairing effort she twisted her face to one side while he kissed her cheek, her ear, her neck, hungrily, savagely, as though nothing would stop him. She brought her hands up and pressed them against his chest.

"No. No," she gasped, turning her face farther away from his kisses. "Franklyn! You mustn't."

And suddenly he had ceased to kiss her. He held her a little away from him, his eyes burning into her own, while his breath came in quick urgent gasps.

"You do not love me?" In his incredulous voice she detected the faint French accent of his father. "You don't want to marry me? Varna——"

He held her thus staring at her in the darkness while their hearts beat wildly and she trembled in his arms.

"Oh Franklyn, don't. I can't bear it. Please, oh please leave me be."

"But Varna, I can't let you go. I love you. I can't go away without you. You're mine, my heart tells me that, you're my destiny just as much like I'm yours and I cannot live another day without you. If you come with me now we shall be so happy—oh so wonderfully happy together—just you and I."

"But I can't. Oh Franklyn, don't you understand——"

"Why? Varna." He gripped her arms and held her until their faces nearly touched. "Don't torture me like this. Tell me why."

"I—because I——"

"You're in love with somebody else!" The words escaped like pistol shots between his teeth. His lips did not move, but his eyes blazed in the darkness and their fierceness frightened her. "I know it now. You're in love with that Englishman. It's that man Torrence, isn't it? He's stolen your heart from me. You don't love me. You never have. You've made me love you, adore you, worship the very ground you tread on. You've made me your abject slave, burning my heart up for your caresses. And now you—love—somebody—else." His voice dropped low until the last word was scarcely above a whisper.

"I don't know." It was almost a cry from her heart. "It's all so bewildering. Oh Franklyn, please go. Please leave me be." She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. "I'm so tired."

Duquesne stood up. All the passion seemed to have drained from him now; he stood, uncertain, like an old man. Only the glint in his eyes as the starlight caught them revealed the turmoil within.

"I'll go now." His voice was low, but trembling with emotion. "But this is not the end, Varna my beloved. I'll never let you go. You'll never marry that man. You're mine and you'll marry me. I'll never let you go. Good night, my sweet angel." He caught her face between his hot palms and kissed her lips.

She leant against the door weak and trembling, and when she opened her eyes he was gone. She stood there staring out at the starlit night with the drone of the cicadas in her ears, and presently she heard Rapide's hoof beats on the gravel drive way, galloping, galloping away out of her dreams. A dog in the negro quarters began to bark and far away in the trees a screech-owl set up its diabolic hooting.

Varna shivered involuntarily and closed the window. Then she dropped her kimono over a chair and climbed into bed. For a long time she lay with her heart still racing,

staring up at the blank ceiling. Her lips felt bruised and sore and her body lay flaccid and weary on the soft mattress. Life seemed to her to have got out of hand and whirled her about, helpless like a doll. If she could not still feel the pressure of Franklyn's arms and the imprint of his kisses on her face she would begin to imagine it was all an exciting dream—and really a dream that had ended a little too soon.

Poor Franklyn, he was such a dear, and he certainly was in the grip of a great passion to-night. It was only with the greatest difficulty she told herself, that she had not gotten caught up in it herself. And if she had, what then? It was indeed terribly sweet of him to have ridden all that way—quite fifteen miles the other side of Vicksburg—to propose to her, to run away with him to-night. The idea, running away at a moment's notice like that! Of course, some girls did that; it was considered quite the thing to do in some families, and, well, she had to admit running away would be terribly thrilling. In a way it was a pity Papa didn't like Franklyn Duquesne. She couldn't see his point about the young captain's parentage: you couldn't always get a beau from only the very best families in Mississippi, and if Mr. Duquesne Senior did come from France from a family nobody knew and with very little money and make it all out of cotton, that's how most other families had gotten their wealth. And she had never believed those stories about the Duquesnes working their negroes to death; folks only said that because the Duquesnes were not quite popular socially.

And Franklyn was so sincere and intense and exciting! It would really have been great fun to have run off suddenly at dead of night like that. Just think what talk there would have been about it, how the Raymond girls and the Devereaux sisters would prattle, how envious Bette Green would be in spite of her bevy of beaux, and how they would all chatter at the Dopprés' tea party. Indeed,

she wondered whether she ever dare tell them that two men—not one, but *two*—had actually *climbed* up on to her gallery to-night to ask her to marry them! Wouldn’t that just set the tongues wagging. Oh if only she dare tell somebody. But she shuddered at what poor Papa and Auntie Debby would say—and think.

Her fingers touched the ring on her left hand and she gave a start of surprise. The diamonds felt coldly brittle to the touch. Why, she was betrothed to Roscoe. He had slipped that ring on her finger out there on the gallery but an hour or two before, and she had held it up to the candle-light that filtered through the curtains and watched the sparkle in the diamonds. “Oh Roscoe,” she remembered exclaiming. “It’s beautiful. Oh, it’s utterly lovely!” And she had thrilled at his voice when he had gathered her in his arms and whispered “Not half so utterly lovely as you are, my beloved”. And she was going to marry him. They would not run away together. She felt sure Roscoe would not care to do that; he was just too English to think of it. He would not consider it the “right” thing to do, and so he had gone to her father in the proper way, and of course Papa liked Roscoe, and so she was formally engaged to him and they would be married when Mr. Pollock came. It seemed now incredible that Roscoe had gone so far as to climb up on to her verandah at all and kissed her so passionately. Perhaps he was terribly forceful and passionate underneath his cynical exterior: she wished she understood him better. And all that had happened in one night—only half a night in fact. Just imagine, two different men had climbed up on to her balcony, both had protested undying love for her and she—Varna Quillon—had allowed them both to kiss her with all the passion imaginable.

A slight noise startled her. Her heart contracted with sudden fear. Some one was entering her room! It couldn’t be Franklyn *back* again, or Roscoe? Or worse still,

another man? As she stifled a scream her mind ran through all the possible men she knew who might be wild enough to come to her like this. But her mind balked at the idea. A *third* visitor—a third lover in one night, and actually coming to a girl's room—really this sort of thing just didn't happen in a respectable household. It was more like one of those French farces Cousin Ella had told her she once saw in Paris. Then she almost sighed with relief as Lucy's white figure crept up to her bed.

"Are you all right, Varna darling?" she asked in a whisper. "I thought I heard a noise, so I came to see if you were sick or anything. Can I come in with you, darling?"

Varna moved up and put an arm about her sister's cool shoulders. Then she directed Lucy's hand until her fingers touched the ring.

"Oh Varna, how exciting!" Lucy exclaimed giving her sister a sudden hug. "Are they diamonds? But, oh why *didn't* you tell me before?"

"Because he—because I thought you were tired tonight and you didn't come into my room."

"Oh but I thought *you* wanted to be alone," Lucy protested in a whisper. "Katie Lou told me."

"Katie Lou gets queer ideas," said Varna.

Lucy clutched her sister impulsively.

"Oh Varna I'm so happy for you darling! And I do so hope you'll," she hesitated, "you'll make *him* happy too."

But when she kissed her Varna found Lucy's face was wet with tears.

CHAPTER XIX

"THIS nigger's charged with being drunk and insolent. When he was arrested he—"

"But Uncle Cal, sir, has never been insolent in his life! He's the dearest soul really."

The marshal looked into Lucy's blue eyes and pursed his lips. Mr. Culbert was a stout, grey-haired man with a bushy grey beard and a penetrating gaze which was levelled at the young lady with a hint of amusement behind the calm eyes.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Quillon," he said with a ghost of a smile, "but I have to go by the evidence given me by the deputy sheriff, and—"

"And you, sir, are bound to *believe* a deputy sheriff?" Varna leant forward in her chair, her ringlets brushing her neck. "Even I—a mere girl—could not believe that."

Mr. Culbert rested his elbows on the desk pressing the tips of his fingers together, and looked around the little court room. He was tired to death of these cases, of sentencing niggers to be locked up in the caboose while they cooled off a bit or until some one came and claimed them. This was the last case this morning and he would like to have dismissed it quickly, giving the prisoner a week in gaol. Caligula seemed to be just another fool nigger who'd been found drunk and asleep against the sidewalk and Mr. Culbert believed in teaching niggers a lesson. The only time they were safe was when they were under lock and key. But he didn't see how he was going to do it this time with three charming young ladies seated before him, with their skirts spread around

them like a billowing sea, apparently bent on rescuing their nigger. And they seemed to have brought most of the negro population of Lorimer Hall with them. The court room looked like a goddam slave auction, he thought, with the crowd of black faces spread around at the back there; and half of them appeared to be little more than children. It was impossible to keep them quiet. Really it was incredible what some of these young ladies would do these days—and such nice girls as Colonel Quillon's two daughters. He wondered who the third young lady was, with the merry round face and expressive hands. He could not remember seeing her before.

"Don't you think it possible, sir," added Varna in her low voice, "that the man, your deputy, was mistaken? Couldn't he have gotten the wrong idea about how Uncle Cal was feeling? You see, sir, Uncle Cal is neither vicious nor disobedient, he's never given any trouble on the plantation. He's the most amiable nigger, but he's inclined to get tired and lie down and go to sleep. Maybe he was just sleeping that way when your man found him."

A ripple of merriment swelled to a wave of soft negro laughter at the back of the room.

"Silence in court!" exclaimed the marshal, bringing his fist on the desk and glaring at the show of white teeth at the back. "Now maybe the prisoner *was* only taking a nap," he agreed, eyeing Varna with a certain admiration. "The deputy sheriff says that the nigger was asleep when he found him. I accept that evidence. He was snoring like a bull."

"Please suh!" piped Katie Lou's indignant voice from the back, "Uncle Cally doan' never sno'. He'm mighty quiet sleepuh."

Varna looked around sharply at her maid while the black folk tittered, and Katie Lou, overcome with blushes at her outburst, hid her face behind another girl's shoulder.

"Silence there," ordered the marshal, "or I'll have you

all cleared out. Now, Miss Quillon," he added, pressing his finger-tips together again, "the evidence was that your nigger Caligula was found lying in a pool of water under the sidewalk boards, and, please note this, he had an empty rum bottle beside him. We have to believe that, Miss."

"Sure. But you don't *know* that the bottle was his, do you, or that he even drank the rum?" Stella's Connecticut accent caused a mild sensation in the court room. It was the first time she had spoken and Mr. Culbert looked again at her with renewed interest. She certainly did look a jolly, lovable Yankee girl, he thought.

"And Uncle Cal has never, never done anything like this befo'," put in Lucy, gazing at the marshal with round eyes.

"Have you any other evidence?" asked Varna before Mr. Culbert could speak.

"I'll say he hasn't," exclaimed Stella crisply. "They jest want an excuse to lock your nigger up."

"Oh but that would be shameful," cried Lucy. "I'm positive he was never drunk. Why po' Uncle Cal never—"

"Besides, sir, even if our nigger *was* asleep as you say," Varna continued, "what earthly harm was he doing?"

"Yes indeed," exclaimed Lucy, "your deputy sheriff hasn't said that he was doing the least bit of harm. Haven't I always said Uncle Cal's the quietest and best behaved nigger—"

"Yes darling, over and over again," laughed Varna. "Why any one would think—"

"Ladies! Ladies, please." Mr. Culbert held up his hand, and leaning back in the chair, looked at each of the girls in turn. Then he caught Roscoe's eye and his mouth twitched. "Being under the influence of liquor is a serious offence for a nigger. But I see that you all are anxious that the prisoner should go unpunished."

"Why, yes indeed," Lucy said eagerly.

"We can punish him at home if need be," suggested Varna.

"You see, we really need him for the curing," Lucy added ingenuously. "He's the only one that knows all about the hams."

"Sure, we'll cure *him*," asserted Stella smiling. "You can rely on us, sir, to take care of that nigger."

Mr. Culbert looked from one to the other again with a puzzled expression, while Caligula himself stood silent behind a wooden rail in a corner of the room, his hands hanging down, his black face drawn and a little grey with fear, his eyes downcast. His singlet was torn and caked with mud and his fuzzy hair still bore the marks of his debauch of the day before.

"The law has to be obeyed," said the marshal, clearing his throat, "and I'm here to see that it is upheld."

There was a muffled groan from the coloured folk and a woolly headed piccaninny started to howl. Mr. Culbert frowned at the group of blacks and an embarrassed mammy stuffed the child against her voluminous skirts, so that the wails became more and more muffled.

"Doan' you cry, chile," crooned the woman with a sly glance towards the marshal, "dat kind man ain't gwine a hahm yo' pap. He know yo' pap ain't done nuthin."

This was followed by an outbreak of tittering, for all the coloured people knew it wasn't Caligula's child at all, and in any case Uncle Cally had his eye on Miss Varna's gal, Katie, and would be marrying her soon if her mistress let her.

Lucy shot a glance at Roscoe with despair and pleading in her eyes, whereupon he gathered himself and stood up.

"If I may be allowed to say a word, sir, on behalf of these ladies," he began, regarding the magistrate with a twinkle in his eye. "I don't think it's any desire on their part to prevent the law punishing the prisoner that has

brought these ladies to the court house to-day. It seems, though, that their nigger, Caligula, has charge of the smoke house at Lorrimer Hall, and with a lot of curing to be done there's no one else who knows how to carry on while the prisoner's in gaol. And you know, sir, that hams don't keep well this warm weather until they're smoked. That, I believe, is the only reason why Miss Quillon and her sister are anxious that their—er—man is not sent to prison just now. If you consider a fine would meet the case, it would be paid at once. That's our only plea."

The marshal nodded, regarding Roscoe with interest as he sat down.

"You're an Englishman, aren't you?" he asked, Roscoe nodded.

"From London?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well now, isn't that fine? I've a cousin who went to England six years ago," said Mr. Culbert, leaning forward across his desk. "He lives in Manchester. That's near London, isn't it? I wonder if you know him—Edwin Grey? He's in the cotton business, but I don't often hear from him."

Roscoe shook his head, suppressing a smile.

"I don't know many people in Manchester," he admitted.

"Well that's too bad you don't know my cousin, Ed. He's a fine man. But I'm mighty pleased to meet you, sir. I'm always glad to meet an Englishman. My own folks came from England originally. Yes, sir." Mr. Culbert sat back looking complacent, while his eye roved along the sea of beauty that was seated before him. "But we must settle this case," he added suddenly.

"We've not heard Uncle Cal's version, sir," said Varna glancing towards the prisoner.

Stella Fairfax sat up suddenly. "Why, sure," she ex-

claimed nasally. "The poor old nigger ought to be allowed to say what happened. Can't your nigger talk, Varna dear?"

"Why of course, darling," exclaimed Varna flashing a smile at the marshal. "May I have your permission, sir, to ask the prisoner a few questions?" she asked, dropping her eyes.

Mr. Culbert hesitated. It was not entirely in order, but being a Southern magistrate he could not very well refuse a lady's request, especially a young lady with Miss Quillon's questing eyes. He nodded.

"Uncle Cal," she said raising her voice, "I want you to answer these questions. You must tell the entire truth, and speak so as the marshal can hear you. Face this way, Uncle Cal, and tell us why you went into town yesterday."

Caligula fumbled with his big hands and shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

"Ah done went to town to fetch dem hides fo' de hyarness, Miss Varna," he mumbled, "de colonel say to me: 'Caligula, dem traces is plumb wore out. You go 'long nigger, an' git dem hides o' Mister Passel's so's we c'n rig up new traces fo' de hosses. So Ah done went into town wid de mules."

"Is that all you did while in the city, Uncle Cal? Just go to Mr. Passel's?"

"Yass'm."

"You're sure you didn't stop anywhere else?" persisted the girl. "Come, think, Uncle Cal."

"Yass'm."

"Now Uncle Cal you're not telling the whole truth," she said reproachfully. "Where else did you go? Think carefully."

"Dassa mighty queer thing, Miss Varna," said the negro brightening. "Ah dunno huccomb Ah fergit it, but Ah done call in Mammy Hicks' sto' fo' to buy sump'n."

"You went into Miss Hicks's store? What did you buy?"

Caligula looked embarrassed. "Sump'n fo' mah Katie's buffday, ma'm."

"Oh, a birthday gift for Katie Lou? That was nice of you, Uncle Cal."

There was a ripple of merriment amongst the coloured folk, and Varna's maid hid her blushes behind a friend's shoulders. Caligula looked pleased with himself.

"But Uncle Cal," continued Varna. "You heard the marshal say you were found asleep by the sidewalk. How came that now?"

"Ah 'specs maybe Ah was kinda tired, Miss Varna."

"That's nothing unusual, is it, Uncle Cal?"

Another wave of merriment swept along the coloured faces.

"But", added Varna, "you were found asleep with a bottle in your hand. How came that?"

"Ah dunno, ma'm."

"It was empty when they found you with it."

"Did'n see no bo'kle, Miss Varna."

"But the deputy sheriff said you were holding it."

"Dunno huccomb Ah do dat."

"But you knew it was empty?"

"Yass'm. Ef Ah'd knowed dey was still rum in dat bo'kle Ah reckon Ah wudd'n agone to sleep." The girl's mouth twitched. "No'm. Ah ain't seed no bo'kle *afore* Ah gone to sleep. Ah reckon dey bwoys must a putten dat der bo'kle in mah han' when Ah was asleep. Dassit, ma'm."

"Then you had not been drinking rum?"

"No'm. Ah ain't tech a drop." It was surprising how virtuous and pained Caligula could look as he stood with his hands hanging almost to his knees and his eyes rolling in the direction of Katie Lou. Varna controlled her desire to laugh and looked sternly at the negro.

"I think, Uncle Cal," she said slowly, "it would be best if you tell us all just what happened after you had

been into Miss Hick's store to buy Katie Lou's gift."⁵

The negro sighed, shaking his head.

"Ah done tried tell 'em all dat yesterdat," he grumbled, "when dey tuk me to de caboose. But dey wudden listen. All day say was—"

"Never mind that, Uncle Cal, now you tell the marshal exactly what you did after leaving the store."

Caligula glanced around at the row of expectant black faces and then towards the white folks' feet.

"When Ah come out de sto'," he said, "wid the passel for mah Katie onder mah arm, Ah was follered by two, maybe t'ree, of dem street dawgs what kinda mak' it day business to smell a nigger outer de town. Ah stop an' say, gentle-like, 'Shoo, go 'way, you good fer nuth'n dawgs, Ah doan' wan' no truck wid you'. But a po' white step up an' say, 'What you callin' mah dawg names fo', huh?' Ah tak a look at de white man an' turn away an' show mah dignity, fo' Ah reckon Ah doan' want no truck wid sech white trash neether. Den he up and put'm fingers to 'm nose an' say, 'Lor' nigger ef you doan smell to high hebben! You stink lak you's bin dead a week.' When Ah heered dat Ah jes' cudden dignify masel' no longer—"

Uncle Cal's voice was drowned in a wave of laughter that swept around the room and enveloped even the white folks. Mr. Culbert slowly rubbed the back of his hand against the end of his nose, Roscoe put his head back and frankly let out a shout of laughter, while Lucy touched Stella's knee, glanced up into her friend's face, and giggled into a handkerchief. Caligula looked around the room at his coloured friends and relatives with a pained expression that soon changed to a wide grin. Varna attempted to put another question, but dissolved into silent laughter, while amid the children's excited shrieks and a rhythmic clapping there welled up the first full, clear notes of a song.

*Nobody knows de trouble Ah seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus—*

Mr. Culbert slammed his fist on the table, setting his features into a stern expression with an effort of will.

"Silence!" he roared. Then he turned to Roscoe. "Since you're willing to take care this negro doesn't get into the city and get drunk again, I'll dismiss the case, but—"

His voice was immediately overwhelmed by a renewed burst of singing. He pushed back his chair and stood up with a helpless gesture. The clapping increased in waves of rhythm while the negroes' bare feet began to beat the floorboards in unison. With faces radiant and eyes rolling the darkies opened their mouths and sang. The marshal sat back gripping the edge of his desk. From long experience he realized that this case was over. Unless he had the court room cleared of the pestilential niggers there would be no stopping them now, once they'd started to sing, and anyway he's already decided to give in to these three charming ladies and let that fool nigger go free.

Roscoe fell silent, looking around at the rapt faces of the blacks. There was so much deep-feeling in their voices, such warm beauty and purity in their throats that it made him feel as if icy fingers were tracing their way up and down his spine. Their feet were stamping louder now, thudding on the floor like the tom-toms of their ancestors in the African jungle, while the clapping had risen to a measured din and the soft notes of their spiritual filled the small room with music. Even Caligula behind his rail had been carried away. Like the rest of them he no longer knew where he was; the court house was forgotten, the gaol not even a memory, his soul was free, free to rise upward into God's own heaven, to shout His name with praise. With his brothers and his sisters he rose now above the bonds of slavery, above the tyranny that his fathers

knew, beyond the four walls of the crowded room; lifting his hands, his eyes to the heaven beyond, he sang with the beauty of an angel.

Roscoe swallowed the lump in his throat and glanced at Varna. Clapping her hands to the rhythm, she was swaying slightly to the music, a dreamy expression on her face, while Lucy, her eyes misty, was frankly joining in the singing. The two girls were singing as their mammy had taught them from the cradle, with the lilting spiritual voice of the negroes, and like the little black children with whom they had been reared, the two sisters felt the same urge to sway and clap hands and sing that held the others in its grip. Only when he caught Stella Fairfax's puzzled gaze as she watched her two cousins did he break into a slow smile, while the desire to take Varna into his arms and smother her lovely face with kisses rose strong within him.

"I've never seen such an extraordinary thing before," he remarked to Stella, when they had been driven home again in the family hack. "Imagine turning a court room into a song festival!"

"Gee, if Cousin Varna and Cousin Lucy aren't too cute," Stella chuckled delightedly. "The idea! Going all the way to the court house over a blessed nigger. A person would think that that Uncle Cal of theirs was one of the family."

"That's just it," said Roscoe thoughtfully, "he is."

"He *is*?" Stella stared. "What on earth do you mean, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe grinned at the horrified look on the little Yankee's face. "I mean that down here in the South the coloured servants are treated as members of the family. Look how old Aunt Mitty governs the whole lot of us here. She's one of the Quillon family, if you like!"

"Well I just can't understand these people letting their servants become so familiar," said Stella, wrinkling her

short nose, "especially when they're only slaves, any way. I think it's positively indecent."

Preparations for the coming wedding ceremony, which was to be performed in the house with a reception if the weather permitted on the front verandah, filled the next few days at the Hall with unusual activity. Outside in the garden the leaves were falling—the first herald of winter—and the weather had broken. A steady rain fell from a leaden sky and with it a wind arose, tearing the last few leaves from the branches and flinging the rain in sudden flurries against the window panes. Beyond the misty line of the levee the grey surface of the river became speckled with muddy white where the wave crests lashed and tumbled. Indoors all was bustle and whispered excitement. Mas'r Ross wid de funny speech was agoing to marry Missie Varna, just as all the folks had said (all but the white folks, that is: they were just queer or ignorant, they never said nuthen). The wedding was to take place right in the drawing-room when that kind reverend gentleman Mr. Pollock arrived, and he was expected to arrive very soon now with the new Mrs. Pollock—his third wife. There would be heaps to do to get the guests' rooms ready. And there was Miss Varna's wedding dress to be made with its eighteen yards of white silk skirting, its white tulle ruchings and its lace trimmings, and lil' Miss Lucy must have her white silk dress altered, too, to be one of the bridesmaids.

Aunt Mitty hustled back and forth carrying a load of responsibility on her ample shoulders, while the imps that invaded the kitchen and the domestic offices learnt that it was more prudent to keep well out of her way while she had so much to see to. If Miss Deborah was consulted several times a day it was only as a concession to her position of authority. Aunt Mitty had not only made up her own mind how everything was to be done, she had

frequently already done it. There were cakes and cookies and candies to be made—for although Dinah was the official cook at Lorrimer Hall she could not make anything like such delicious short pastry as Aunt Mitty's, and Aunt Mitty knew it, and it would have been more than Dinah's life was worth if she had tried to keep Aunt Mitty away from the pastry-board. There were also wines to be brought out from the cellar, rich old wines in grimy bottles that had lain undisturbed since the father of Lucullus, who had served the Colonel's father, had reverently laid them in their resting-place.

"This house has not seen a wedding feast for many a year, Lucullus," remarked the colonel as he limped around on his two sticks, examining his cellar while his servant held the candlestick. "Why the last wedding here at Lorrimer was when Miss Julia and I——" he broke off, pretending to examine a cork in one of the bottles.

"Yass, Mas'r John."

"You remember that, eh Lucullus?"

The tall negro swallowed, looking at his master in the light of the candle with a soft expression in his eyes.

"Deed I do, Mas'r John," he mumbled, for Lucullus had loved, with a primitive worship, the quiet, kind and sympathetic lady who had been Varna's mother.

"Well, we must have a feast that we'll never forget," added the Colonel hurriedly, as he drew a bottle from its rack. "This claret has been here long enough, Lucullus. See that it's opened when the time comes."

"Yas, Mas'r John."

"Now Lucullus," continued the Colonel knitting his brows, "I think there's still a half-dozen bottles of that '15 Madcira." He clicked his tongue reflectively. "We must broach that on an occasion like this, my old friend."

"Yass, Mas'r John."

And in other quarters of the Big House there was more excitement, for after his release from the court Caligula

had approached Miss Varna through devious channels and asked to be allowed to marry Katie Lou. Varna had taken her maid aside and satisfied herself that the girl really was deeply in love with Uncle Cal. She would have liked Katie Lou to have a younger and better-looking husband than Uncle Cal—for he was quite fifteen years older than the girl—but they appeared to have fully made up their minds, and as she, Varna, could not for the moment think of a more suitable husband for her maid she gave her consent.

"Would you like to be married the same day as I am, Katie Lou?" she asked.

"Oh Miss Varnal!" said the girl, her face lighting up. "Ah sho' would lak dat."

"Very well, then, Katie Lou. I'll ask the minister to perform the ceremony for you and Caligula immediately after our service."

"Oh Miss Varna," Katie Lou exclaimed, and overcome with joy she impulsively caught her mistress's hand and kissed it.

In the midst of all this excitement it seemed to Roscoe that he saw less of Varna than if they were not even betrothed, for it was almost impossible for them to avoid the chaperonage of Miss Deborah from her invalid's chair, while the watchful eyes of Aunt Mitty appeared to seek them out anywhere. Roscoe felt, indeed, since the announcement of their engagement, as though he were living under a microscope, and his every advance towards Varna, their every brief conversation, was suspect. There were a hundred things he wanted to discuss with her—the plans for their honeymoon to Lake Pontchartrain, the house he was renting for them both in Vicksburg, the question of which of her servants Varna would bring with her and how many extra servants he would have to employ from outside. There was also the vexed question of what status these servants were to be in their house-

hold, for he still had a rooted objection to keeping them as slaves, and he wanted to have a long talk with Varna on this point, to induce her to free Katie Lou and Caligula and Patsy and Tom and any others that she would bring with her from Lorrimer Hall. But try as he would it seemed almost impossible to get Varna to himself for more than a few moments.

"Roscoe, I'm sure you're just dying to speak with Varna alone for a little," whispered Lucy once, watching him with understanding eyes. "But she's trying on her wedding dress a^{ll}," she threw out her delicate hands, "you just can't go in there now. But maybe—I could stay and converse a little while if you think—" she hesitated.

"Nothing would charm and delight me more, Lucy," he said gallantly, bowing to the dictates of feminine adornment; but while she tried to entertain him, fighting to keep her voice cheerful, she saw how absent-minded he was. It was so clear that he was thinking of Varna all the while.

"And Roscoe, there's one little matter I'd like to discuss with you," the Colonel said later, leading him towards the library when he knew Varna was alone for a few minutes on the verandah. "I've decided to hand the sawmill over to you as a wedding gift. I'm getting too old to manage the whole of this plantation, and that woodyard needs pulling together. That headman Jake's not been operating it at all well lately, and I thought if you cared to take it over, you would make a pretty big saving on your bill for cordwood for your steamboats. Having no son, I reckoned I'd have to rely on Varna's husband to carry on this plantation one day, when my time's up, and I shall feel very happy to think that I can leave it on your hands."

And although Roscoe was fully appreciative of the Colonel's gesture towards him as his prospective son-in-law, he grudged the evening the two men spent in the

library going into details of management, while he thought of Varna wasted in the drawing-room merely sewing or just talking with the other ladies.

The next day Roscoe had to leave on a hurried trip to New Orleans, for his presidency of the newly-formed Telegraph Steam Packet Company called for more urgent attention, while he could not in any case remain at Lorrimer Hall right up to the day of the wedding. Only once, however, was he able to find Varna alone in the sitting-room for a few minutes. She was wearing a pale-green hoop dress that set off the smallness of her waist and became her to perfection. Around the skirt of her crinoline were draped ruchings of old gold lace, almost matching her coppery hair. Her vivacious, provocative eyes were turned away as he entered.

"This is simply terrible," he said, catching hold of her shoulders and turning her round to face him.

"Terrible?" she repeated looking up at him with a trace of insolence. "But why, indeed?"

"Why?" he said grimly. "Haven't I been trying all day to find you alone, and nobody will let me? Haven't you been the centre of the biggest crowd of people I seem to have seen for years? And all I've wanted is to get you alone to myself, to crush those lovely, adorable lips with my own." And gripping her tightly he kissed her laughing mouth with a fierceness that surprised her. "I simply hate the thought of this trip to New Orleans without you, and every day away from you, my darling, will seem a year. But thank God," he added, holding her a little away from him and looking at her intently, "in less than a fortnight I *will* have you to myself—and I won't let a soul come near you."

"Oh, but I must have my maid to attend me," she flashed, tossing her head.

"Very well, Katie Lou," he consented reluctantly. "But by God, nobody else!"

"Your language, sir," she said teasingly drawing herself up, "is not fit for a lady's ears. Pray desist."

And he would have crushed her face with kisses had not Aunt Mitty come in at that moment with the air of a general taking over a battle command.

"Miss Varna," she ordered in her throaty voice, taking possession of the girl from under Roscoe's nose, "Miss Deborah done tolle me Ah got to show you dem der cyurtains fo' de guest room. Miss Deborah say to come right now this instant." And with a shrug of her shoulders Varna was obliged to go leaving her betrothed to console himself in man's own way, by blasting everything and everybody but his beloved, under his breath.

CHAPTER XX

A FEW days after Roscoe had departed with unconcealed reluctance for New Orleans the Rev. Silas Pollock and his young wife arrived in their ancient hack, and the two were taken into the Quillon household with welcoming hospitality. It was nearly a year since the Pollocks had come to stay at Lorrimer Hall; the last time had been just before Christmas, when the roads had been so impassable from the rains that the reverend gentleman and his wife had had to stay until well into February before moving on further south.

Mrs. Pollock had then been a bride of but a few months, a quiet, demure, self-effacing slip of a girl of not more than twenty, with corn-coloured hair, large china-blue eyes and a pale complexion that even Varna had envied. Sarah was Mr. Pollock's third wife and they had appeared such a devoted couple although Mr. Pollock was quite thirty years her senior. He was a large-boned, florid, clean-shaven man, with unbounded energy and a zest for life shared by few of his contemporaries. To other men his handshake seemed limp and lacking in confidence, but to the ladies his manners were so courteous and his attitude towards his young wife was always seen to be so thoughtful for her comfort, so gentlemanly and considerate, that it was a puzzle why they had not yet had any children. The ladies who accompanied their husbands to supper parties at the hall were apt to discuss the phenomenon when the gentlemen were not present.

"I thought, my dear, last time they were here she was already *in a fix*."

"So did I, dear. After all, they'd been married several months, and she *did* look a little pale, don't you think, last Christmas?"

"Well, nothing's happened so far, has it? And I'm sure he's such a good, kind man he'd never dream of making Sarah travel if she was—well, that way."

"Do you think it possible"—her fan hid the lower part of the speaker's face—"she can't have any?"

"Or perhaps, my dear, being a pillar of the Church, Mr. Pollock doesn't—uh—behave like other men. I mean—"

"Oh fie, fie! Men are men, whether they belong to the Church or not."

"Alas, yes. Or I'd have made sure to marry a minister myself. I'm sick to death of it."

"Really, my dear! I declare you're very outspoken."

"So would you be, my dear, if you'd been married as long as I have and had nine children!"

The Reverend Silas Pollock was a popular guest at the hall, for he seemed to bring an air of benevolence with him that was mingled with good fellowship and an appreciation of old wine and good food. The ladies were a little shocked to notice how tired and pale Sarah was looking, but beyond a slight headache and fatigue after the long and jolty journey she assured them that she was quite well. Yet as they sat at dinner that evening Sarah Pollock seemed to have lost that gay sparkle and vivacity that had sustained her during her first visit, and she sat for minutes at a time staring at the orange candle shades over the centre of the table, apparently oblivious of the conversation going on around her.

Mr. Pollock, of course, was delighted when he learnt of the double ceremony he was to perform in a week's time. His round face beamed in the light of the candles and he rubbed his soft, broad hands together.

"Capital, capital," he said in his smooth voice, glancing

around at the guests and their wives, "I could wish for a no more charming bride than Miss Varna. And so there are to be two weddings, are there?"

"We always make it a rule, Mr. Pollock," said Aunt Debby from her end of the table, "to regularize our servants' unions, and we thought this a good opportunity for Katie Lou and Caligula to marry."

"A capital plan, ma'm. A capital plan," agreed the reverend gentleman as he attacked his roast chicken with gusto at the thought of such a pleasant ritual. Marrying young people gave him great pleasure, for he always liked to think about the bride for hours afterwards.

"You must be feeling fatigued after your long drive to-day," remarked Aunt Debby, giving Sarah Pollock a compassionate look as the grandfather clock on the stairs struck ten. "Poor child, we're most inconsiderate keeping you up when you ought to have retired long ago—just to put back the bloom in those pretty cheeks," she added smilingly touching the young wife's chin with her fan.

When the other guests had called for their carriages Sarah was shown to the big room allotted to her and her husband. The headache that had clung to her all afternoon was still unabated, weighing on her temples and across her eyes with a dull pain that made her feel stupid and weary. Yet she knew she would not be able to sleep once her head touched the pillow: ever since she had lost her unborn child after their carriage had overturned on the Jackson road, long journeys had given her a headache. The illness that had nearly cost her her own life had left her weak and listless, and she wondered whether she would ever have the energy again to sparkle, to be vivacious and to enjoy talking for the sake of talking as she had done before her marriage to Mr. Pollock.

She pressed the back of her hand to her brow, pushing the yellow hair away from her forehead and stared around at the room. In the light of the candles on the dressing-

table the size of the room almost frightened her. The ceiling was lofty and partly in shadow and the flowers on the wallpaper looked oddly like hundreds of little animals clinging to the wall. The pictures looked odd, too, in their great dark frames hanging sombrely in the dim light. One was a steel engraving showing a mass of frenzied people facing what looked like the wrath of God striking them from the clouds, but may have been the destruction of Pompeii; Sarah would not look again at this picture, but gazed at the others in succession, her eyes dilated like a child's who dreads what she will see but is condemned to look. Perhaps they were just ordinary family portraits, but to her imagination the bearded faces wore a fierce, accusing expression and the woman with her hair severely parted down the middle and drawn flat over her ears looked as though she had just murdered her child.

Sarah tore her fascinated gaze from the monsters' gallery and began to undress. Feeling too abashed and unwell to talk to another person to-night, she had refused Miss Varna's kind offer to let her maid come and fix Sarah's hair; now she rather wished she hadn't been left to undress by herself in this great barn of a room. The steady light from the candles in their tall silver sticks seemed only to make the shadows around her the more ominous and she decided to undress hurriedly and get into bed before Mr. Pollock came in.

The white mound of the four-poster bed stared back at her and something seemed to clutch at her heart. There was another bed also in the room, a small bed in the far corner, intended doubtless for some child. Looking at it as she ran the brush through her fair tresses, she began to think that it might be large enough for her; she was very small and she was certain the little bed would not be too short for her. Not once since she was married had she been able to sleep alone, and the thought that to-night if she just crept into that little bed she would not have to

endure Mr. Pollock's snores close to her face suddenly lifted up her spirits, and a ghost of a smile spread over her pale face in the mirror. She did not know what he would say to her but she would have to explain how much she desired to sleep alone. It was going to be difficult and the thought of the ordeal sent a stab of hot pain through her; but now was the only opportunity, in their friends' house and with another bed actually ready for her. If only she were sure she had the courage. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

ON the morning of his wedding Roscoe dressed himself with meticulous care. It was a novelty to him to stand at his window in his own house—or the house, at any rate, which he had taken on a three years' lease on Jefferson Street—and to be able to overlook the Vicksburg steam-boat landing, the broad sweep of the river curving past the waterfront and the dark line of trees fringing the sandy Louisiana shore. The thought that by the time Varna and he returned from their trip to New Orleans and Lake Pontchartrain the house would be in working order with a full staff of servants gave him a warm feeling of satisfaction as he wrestled with his collar.

With a grimace in the mirror above the washstand he adjusted the white ruffle of his shirt against the black bow with some precision, and was about to put on his coat when there was a tap at the door and Uncle Ben appeared. By his wildly rolling eyes and shaking hands the negro betrayed unusual excitement.

"Mas'r Ross," he began, and then choked, looking like a hen that has swallowed her egg.

"What the devil's the matter, Ben?" Roscoe swung round on his servant testily. "Don't stand there goggling. What *is* it?"

"Mas'r Ross," said Uncle Ben at last. "De lil' missie 'm gone!"

"Gone? Who? What the deuce are you driving at, you fool nigger?"

"Miss Varna, suh. She done went wid de Cap'n."

"Miss Varna's *gone*? With Captain—here." Roscoe

seized the trembling darkie by the arm, and dragging him into the room, kicked the door to with a slam. "What's all this about? What d'you mean, Miss Varna's gone?"

Uncle Ben's eyes rolled heavenwards.

"Katie Lou, Miss Varna's gal, done tol' me," he said, breathing hard. "She done tol' me, she hear de Cap'n come to Miss Varna's window dis mawnin, an'——"

"Captain Duquesne?"

"Yassuh. An' she done tol' me she heerd de Cap'n say, kind a low, 'Make haste, honey, we's takin' de cyars at de railroad crossin' fo' New Aulins.' An' de lil' missie climb down to de cap'ns kerridge an'——"

"How long ago was this?" demanded Roscoe, searching the negro's face with one arm in his coat sleeve.

Uncle Ben scratched his head.

"Ah jes' doan' know exac'ly," he began, "but when dat cullud gal Katie Lou done tol' me——"

"How long ago, you damn fool?" roared Roscoe, squeezing the negro's arm. "An hour, half an hour, how long?"

"Mebbe 'bout an hour, suh. Ah doan' exac'ly know." Roscoe slipped into his coat.

"Go and saddle Blaze," he ordered.

"Yassuh, Ah bin an' done dat already," said Ben nodding with relief. "De hoss am at de do', suh."

"Good. Now give me those boots. Hurry."

He found Blaze tethered to a post outside the back door ready saddled. As he swung himself up into the saddle he turned to Uncle Ben's joyous face.

"Thank you, my old friend," he said, "there are times when your brain does work. You're sure now it was the railroad crossing they're making for?"

"Sartin suh. Hit's wheah de cyars come long on dey tracks. Mah Katie heerd de Cap'n say——" But his master was off down the street before he could finish the sentence.

Blaze sensed his master's urgency and broke into a quick gallop. Hatless and with his coat tail flying Roscoe bent low in the saddle and spurred the horse on with encouraging noises through his teeth. Roscoe led him off the dirt road and on to the short grass and scrub myrtle, taking a short cut across country towards the Jackson pike. He knew the crossing where folks flagged the trains, having come past it once in the opposite direction from a long canter one afternoon to have a look at the railroad tracks.

With his lips compressed and his face set with an expression that bade no interference, his eyes smouldered as they looked neither to the right nor the left. In imagination he saw himself arriving too late, to find the south-bound train gone and Varna gone for ever.

"By God," he swore between clenched teeth. "I'll follow that scoundrel all the way to Orleans if I don't get him now."

Once the shock of Uncle Ben's news had passed over he felt now a growing exultation, he could feel the blood hastening in his veins, and he almost shouted with excitement as he felt his horse gathering his muscles under him for a jump. For once in his life he had learnt to hate a man, and he was learning what a stimulant the act of hating was. All his suspicions of that French captain, all the jealousy he had felt about him and suppressed as unworthy, flared up into a great rage that sent him riding wildly and dangerously past scrub and trees and sandy holes towards the railroad tracks. If he could just get Franklyn Duquesne's sneering face in front of him now, he thought, he would send all his accumulated irritation and suppressed dislike behind his fist. . . .

He heard the locomotive's bell tolling long before he could see the tracks and could hear the rhythmic clatter of the wheels slowing down. A cloud of smoke billowed up above the scrub oaks and a plume of steam whitened it

against the sky as the train drew to a halt beyond the trees.

With renewed vigour he forced Blaze into a wild gallop, and as they rounded a turn in the road the train came into view. It had stopped at the road crossing and Roscoe's heart leapt as he caught sight of a lady in a grey travelling coat mounting the steps of the last car from a waiting carriage, followed by the tall figure of Duquesne.

The hack wheeled around as the engine's whistle gave a short hoot, and with sharp barks from its great funnel the little engine started off once more. Duquesne's coachman goggled as the lone horse with its rider thudded past, throwing the turf high into the air, and he stopped his carriage to watch. By the time Roscoe came abreast the last coach the train was rapidly gathering speed once more. For an instant he was tempted to spring on to the end platform, but in a flash a better plan came to him. Urging Blaze on he galloped alongside the long wooden coaches through a hail of hot wood ash and sweet-smelling smoke, gaining slowly on the efforts of the little engine and trusting that they would not come to a trestle or a culvert that he could not cross. Slowly he overtook the four coaches one after another until he was riding next to the tender with its pile of cordwood and its ornamental lettering. The engineer was leaning out of his window engrossed in the track ahead, and as he closed up to the panelled sides of the wooden cab, Roscoe got an impression of the boiler with its array of polished brass pipes and taps and handles, the red glare of the fire door and the fireman working the long fire rake in the monster's maw; he caught a vision of silvery coupling rods flashing around vermillion-painted wheels, of shining brass bands and domes and a bell tolling on the maroon-coloured boiler, and above all the black cone-shaped stack belching clouds of dense smoke; and then he had drawn alongside the engineer himself.

"Hi, stop! Stop!" shouted Roscoe waving a hand.

Glancing down at the horseman the engineer reacted at once. He was used to having his train stopped to avoid disasters in this region of bad tracks and his hand automatically pushed the throttle lever and gave the whistle cord a sharp tug. The fireman dropped his iron rake and leapt to the tender brake handle, and as the train ground slowly to a standstill once more Roscoe reigned in, letting the coaches pass him until he was close to the end car. Then he leapt on to the platform and pushed open the aisle door.

The car inside was crowded and full of men and tobacco smoke. As he hurried down the centre aisle past the rows of seats, involuntarily kicking one of the brass cuspidors on his way, a buzz of conversation followed him, while passengers threw up the windows and leaned out inquiringly.

In the second coach where no tobacco smoke dimmed the air, he found them. Varna was seated with her back to him, a saucy little black hat on her head, with an ostrich feather curving over her flaming hair. As Duquesne caught sight of Roscoe he sprang to his feet, facing him, a strange pallor coming over his face. At the sudden movement Varna looked round and Roscoe experienced a sharp thrill of satisfaction at the startled expression in her eyes.

"I've come to take Miss Quillon home," he said eyeing Duquesne, surprised at the depth in his voice.

"Miss Quillon, suh, has decided to become my wife," said Duquesne coldly returning Roscoe's stare. "We are going to New Orleans."

Roscoe inclined his head towards the girl.

"You're coming back with me," he said grimly. "And as for this fellow——" he clenched his fist and stepped towards Duquesne.

Like lightning Duquesne's hand went to his side and

levelled a pistol. The movement was automatic and took Roscoe by surprise. There was a flash and a deafening report seemed to shatter the inside of the coach. A woman screamed and the other passengers leapt to their feet. Scarcely aware of the sensation that something had burned the side of his neck, Roscoe drove his fist at Duquesne's jaw. He put his whole weight, all the accumulated energy of his hatred of the man, behind the blow, and Duquesne staggered back with the smoking pistol still in his hand. Before he could level it again Roscoe strode forward and delivered two smashing blows to the Captain's face. One would have been enough. The gun fell to the floor, clattering under a seat, while Duquesne staggered back again to fall headlong down the aisle, where he lay still.

With the blood singing in his veins, for he had not laid any one out so effectively since student days, Roscoe turned towards Varna.

"Come along now," he ordered harshly, gripping her arm and dragging her to her feet, only half aware of the startled faces of the other passengers grouped along each side of the central aisle. At the end of the passageway he paused, still holding Varna's arm with a grip that hurt. "Where's your luggage?" he asked.

She looked at him with wide open eyes. For the first time in her life Varna was really frightened of a man.

"My baggage?" she faltered. "I—I didn't bring any."

Roscoe stared incredulous. "You—you were going to New Orleans with that fellow, you little fool, *without* any luggage?"

"You're hurting me," she said, breathing heavily.

"I'm going to," he growled as he pushed her through the door out on to the platform. He helped her down the three steps and lifted her to the ground while heads popped out of the open windows and a hum of conversation followed them.

The conductor, red faced and important, appeared at the platform between the coaches.

"Say, what d'ya mean," he called down to them, "holding up my train like this?"

Roscoe made a magnificent gesture.

"This lady", he said, grinning, "has decided not to travel to-day. We shan't need your train any longer," he added, magnanimously. "You can take it wherever you like now, thank you."

The conductor swore and added comments in a low voice not intended for ladies' ears. Then the engine whistled once more, and the train started with a jerking of couplings.

Roscoe caught sight of Blaze grazing peacefully on the grass beside the track and called him, releasing Varna's arm.

She stamped her foot.

"How dare you humiliate me before all those people!" she stormed, biting her lip and glaring at him.

"I could ask you the same question," he said smoothly as he caught hold of the horse's bridle. "You know we're to be married to-day?"

She turned her back on him, her cheeks flushing, while her eyes snapped trying to hold back the tears.

"The guests will be expecting us," he went on in a calm voice with a dangerous glint in his eye.

Varna stamped her foot again.

"I'm not coming," she snapped. "I'm not going to be made to marry you against my will. I don't want to, and I don't intend to. Pray go and order me a carriage."

He stood over her, a slow smile spreading over his face while he took in every feature of her stylish black hat, the burning copper in her hair, the proud set of her head on her narrow, square shoulders, the little belt around her waist and the flowing curves of her travelling skirt. She did not move, but remained standing with her back to him, her face flushed and her lower lip pouting.

"We're going right back to Lorrimer," he told her in a faintly mocking voice, "and by this afternoon you'll be Mrs. Torrence. Mrs. Roscoe Torrence. Nice name."

"No!"

He saw her shoulders jerk back and noticed the upward tilt of her chin. A look of admiration softened his eyes as he watched her but the line of his mouth remained hard.

"No. Never," she repeated like a child refusing a plate of sago. "I'll never, never marry you after what you've done!"

He caught her shoulders and swung her round so unexpectedly that she almost lost her balance and clutched his sleeve to save herself. Her hat shifted a little over one eye and she tried to put it straight, but he gripped her arms too tightly. He held her thus eyeing her ruffled appearance, and smiled. There was a sardonic light in his eyes that she had never seen before, a triumphant, determined gleam that both angered and frightened her.

"Listen, my little wild cat," he said, scarcely moving his lips, "you're coming right back home and we're being married as soon as we get there. You delightful, fascinating, devilish little charmer, you're not going to escape from me again. Fancy running off like that with that swine—and without any clothes too!"

"How—how *dare* you speak of Fran—of Captain Duquesne like that?" In her uncontrolled anger she stood on tiptoe glaring up at him with her little chin stuck out and her nostrils quivering. A maddeningly appraising smile spread over his face. "Captain Duquesne's worth two of you," she added choking with rage. "I hate you for your English smugness, your superiority——"

Roscoe laughed aloud at her pronunciation of the word. "By gad," he exclaimed admiringly, "it suits you to lose your temper, my sweet one, even with your hat awry. Gives you such a healthy colour."

Her face was so contorted with rage as she stared up at him that she looked almost ugly. Her mouth was twisted and her eyes blazed with fury.

"Leave me be," she cried trying to break away. "Oh how I hate you!"

"You don't," he mocked. "You just love me. And", he added, seizing her hands, "I adore you, Varna. Look at me. Raise your face, and kiss me."

She dropped her head, trying to escape from his powerful hands. Then he suddenly caught her to him, and bending over her kissed her savagely on the lips.

She struggled and beat her hands against his shoulders, while her feet kicked her skirt in the sand, and the tears felt hot under her eyelids. Then he let her go as suddenly, stepping back and looking at her with a triumphant smile. Panting with fury she lifted her arm and slapped his face.

For a moment he stood facing her while the mark of her hand reddened on his cheek. Then she saw that he was bleeding, that the blood was congealing about his collar from the bullet where it had grazed his neck. She had not noticed that before, and her hand instinctively sought her tiny lace handkerchief. But he seemed to be quite unconscious of the fact.

"You little devil," he exclaimed half angry, half laughing, "I'll teach you not to do that," and before she could escape him he picked her up and threw her, face downwards as if she had been a sack of straw, across Blaze's saddle. Her skirts went over her head and she lay across the smooth saddle kicking violently and beating Blaze's flank with her hands. And with her pantalettes provocatively displayed he held her down and administered what was probably the soundest spanking that any white girl had ever had in the state of Mississippi.

Then he mounted the saddle and made her sit up. She clutched the lapels of his coat with angry fingers and glared up at him, her eyes snapping and her mouth working

convulsively, while her brain reeled under the unbelievable thing that had happened to her.

"You--oh, you *hurt* me!" she managed to say, swallowing hard.

"I meant to," he told her in an even voice. "You deserved it."

"It's beastly and cruel of you to treat a girl so," she cried. "I hate you. Oh *how* I hate you."

She hid her face against his sleeve while her whole body shook with sobs and the unbearable discomfort of the saddle made her cry all the more. It took all her self-control to sit still.

"You'll learn to appreciate me some day, believe it or not," he murmured with a whimsical smile that was lost on her as he pulled out a large handkerchief from his cuff. He moved her head until her face showed and held the handkerchief to her nose. "Now blow. Not a little ladylike sniff. Give a real hard blow."

For the first time of her life she obeyed him.

"Do you know, my sweet," he said after a long silence while Blaze jogged slowly back along the road, "you're going to love being my wife." He bent down and kissed her unresisting mouth. It was moist with tears. "Why in less than a year's time you'll thank your lucky stars I stopped that train in time. By the way," he added suddenly shaking with suppressed laughter, "my God I'd forgotten him! I wonder how far the gallant Captain will be taken in that train?"

She bit her lip and burying her face in his sleeve again, broke into another paroxysm of sobbing.

"Don't cry, darling," he advised in a kinder voice, "we're nearly home now. Your hat's even more awry and you mustn't be seen on your wedding day with your eyes all swollen. Come now, sit up."

As they came to the carriageway that circled round towards the front of the house she tried to wriggle free.

"Let me go," she whispered. "Please let me get down."

"No," he said firmly shaking his head. "No Southern gentleman would dream of dumping his bride-to-be in the drive like this. And I'm going to start right now learning to be a *real* South'n gen'leman," he added, trying to copy her pronunciation. "You don't get down, miss, until Blaze takes us majestically right up to the front porch. And, by gad, just look at our friends on the verandah now! It looks as though we're just in time for breakfast." He waved his hand. "There's dear old Mr. Pollock beaming all over his fat face—the damned old Psalm smiter—and little Mrs. Pollock trying to smile. I feel sorry for that poor woman. And there's—"

"Oh let me get down" hissed Varna, plucking his sleeve. Then she glanced up at him, her face crimson with shame. "Please Roscoe," she pleaded, "haven't you humiliated me enough already?"

For a moment he wanted to fold her in his arms and implore forgiveness for his harsh treatment of her: he wanted so much to kiss those wide, pleading eyes and to brush away the tears that had run down to the corners of her mouth; she looked so slight and helpless, and it hurt him to see her like that. But the conviction that if he didn't gain the upper hand now he never would prompted him to hold on to her until they had almost reached the porch steps.

"I love you enough to warn you," he whispered, still gripping her arm, "never, never to try any such trick on me again."

Then he released her as Lucullus came up to lift his young mistress down. Without a backward glance or a word to anybody Varna picked up her skirts and ran up the steps into the house. Roscoe watched her, and then his eye fell on Lucy who was standing with a hand on the rail and the other pressed to her bosom. Her eyes looked dark in her pale face and Roscoe tried to read the message

in them, but his thoughts followed his chosen bride and he turned to face her father.

The Colonel laid a hand on Blaze's mane and nodded appraisingly at Roscoe.

"It looks like you'll tame her all right, my boy," he said smiling. "It's more than I've ever been able to do."

CHAPTER XXII

TWICE every day the sea rises, welling up in all the bays and harbours and inlets, bringing the salt flood softly, caressingly, into the channels and bayous and creeks until the rivers have risen and the banks are brimming with the wonder of high water. "L'heure de la marée", the hour of the tide, the French call it in their expressive language, and while high tide lasts it is indeed the hour of opportunity, when harbours bustle with activity and the great ships get under way for their voyages across the world.

With the coming of the flood-tide boats that have languished for hours on the mud flats, listed on their bilges with their masts at rakish angles, feel the urge of the water as it wells up around them; they move, buoyed up by the rising tide, and soon they are afloat again, swinging restlessly at their cables. In the creeks the mud is covered and the raucous seabirds retreat before it, inch by inch, grudging the conquest of their feeding-grounds as the water laps playfully into tiny gullies and rithes. Farther up the rivers the sluggish stream is arrested as the young flood surges in, mingling with the brackish water and swelling the channel with importance. Soon every creek and gully is full and the gulls wheel overhead, watching and waiting for the sea to bring in its harvest. The riverside towns come to life, their weed-grown jetties hum with salty talk as the fishermen put off in their skiffs, and sails drift across the face of the harbour. The hour of high water, the climax of maritime life, is at hand,

and all who go down to the sea in boats seize the fullness of the flood to follow their appointed tasks.

But all too soon the busy hour passes, the water begins to fall. The tall ships are gone, catching the first of the ebb across the bar; the fisher boats have set their russet sails, and as the water moves slowly seaward, they too drop down on the tide, leaving the little port to slumber for another day. The water falls. Weed that had waved luxuriantly in deep green water now clings to rotting posts; the mud rises up from the river bed, flat, grey and odourous, and the little boats, left dismayed on their moorings like dogs forgotten by their masters, settle once again over on their bilges, resigned prisoners till the tide shall come again. And the gulls, profiting by others' misfortune, wheel and swoop down with plaintive cries to paddle and scold on the glutinous flats.

In the affairs of men likewise there comes a fair tide that, taken at the flood, urges them on towards their expectations, bearing them triumphantly onward while fortune smiles and the stars nod their approval, and even the gods hide their mocking faces. On the Mississippi trade had boomed and the steamboat wharves at New Orleans were packed as never before. Even the advent of the railroads running up from the Gulf—the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern, the Mississippi Central, the Mobile and Ohio—with their lumbering freight cars and snorting funnel stacked iron horses—had made as yet no appreciable difference to the freight that filled the wharves and jetties up and down the river. The steamboats ran laden to their sponsons with the produce and merchandise of the Mississippi Valley, and with every cabin full captains turned away passengers at the landings.

During those first two years of his marriage it seemed to Roscoe that fortune brought him more reward than he deserved. Under the impetus of the boom in river trade his steamboat company paid huge dividends, and

added yet another boat to their fleet, the *Vidalia*, a new and even more sumptuous vessel than the others. He would have liked to call the new boat after his wife, but Varna protested against such vulgar publicity for herself, and when his disappointment was forgotten he admired her for it. The woodyard was kept busy, too, meeting the constant demands of the steamboats for more and more cordwood, while, as a sideline whose irony gave Roscoe much private amusement, he sold hundreds of sawn pine logs to his rivals, the railroad, for ties and trestles.

His presidency of the Telegraph Steam Packet Company added to his managership of the woodyard, gave him sufficient duties to keep him pleasantly occupied, and there were times when he looked back at his life in London, at his early years in hospitals and his practice in the West End, as an existence that had occurred only in the imagination. It was difficult now even to imagine the time when he had been a hard-working doctor and that terrible year when his wife had left him was like a hideous nightmare hidden in the dark recesses of his mind.

He had given Varna everything that money could buy. Oakwood, their house on Jefferson Street on the north side of the city, was one of the most pleasantly located houses in Vicksburg. It was a tall three-story house, standing back from the sidewalk with a short straight drive leading up to the front porch through a formal garden. Like its neighbours on either side it appeared to rise alone, like a white cloud in the sky, above the riot of purple rhododendron bushes and white magnolia that nestled against the porch and from the street passers-by could glimpse a back yard with a well-kept lawn shady under a measured group of tall cypresses. From the upper gallery the view overlooked the batteries on the side of the bluff while across the broad sweep of the river the

shacks at De Soto, where the railroad from Shreveport terminated by the ferry, appeared to nestle amongst the trees like children's toy houses left forgotten on the lawn. From his bedroom window Roscoe could watch the chimneys of steamboats coming down river long before the boats themselves came into view around the bend, for the river almost doubled back on itself above Lorriimer plantation and De Soto lay on a narrow neck of Louisiana shore within the loop.

Varna had brought with her her maid Katie Lou and her husband Caligula, and a number of the Lorriimer servants, while Roscoe had Uncle Ben to wait on him as his butler and valet, and their first argument had arisen on the question of the servants. He had stated his intention of taking out free papers for all the staff, so that none of them would be slaves, but Varna had protested.

"What earthly good will come of that?" she demanded. "What difference will it make to any of our people if they are freed, I'd like to know?"

"It will remove the stigma of being owned," said Roscoe patiently. "Can't you see, darling, what it means to a man or a woman to feel they're free? That their children belong to them and not to their masters? And negroes are just as human as we are."

"I don't see what good it will do any of them. They're not used to being free. They won't know what it's all about, and I declare they've gotten quite uppity enough already without any further encouragement. Look what becomes of the freedmen."

"Well, what does become of them?" Roscoe's voice was like velvet, but his eyes glittered.

"Why, look how wretched they are, uncared for, half-starved, living in sin, in horrible little cabins down by the levee. Niggers are no better than cattle once you forsake them and leave them to look after themselves."

"Of course they are, my dear, if they're just left to fend

for themselves and starve in old age. But we should still look after our servants."

Varna made a clicking noise with her tongue.

"Really, I declare, Roscoe," she said in exasperation, "I wish you could leave these problems alone until you understand niggers better and the way we have to treat them."

"I won't have any slavery in *my* house," he said shutting his mouth tight.

For a brief moment Varna kept her eyes on him as though considering her next remark.

"I know it's not for a wife to say what a husband may do with her property," she said slowly, "but whatever you decide to do with Uncle Ben and any of the people you have gotten in since we were married, I hope you'll allow me to treat *my* servants as I like."

Roscoe hesitated, watching the expression behind her eyes and then threw out his hands, laughing. Instinct told him that to oppose Varna now would only be to court trouble; it were wiser to humour an expectant mother.

"Come, my darling," he said, catching her hand, "let's not quarrel about that. You can have your slaves, for", he pinched her chin gently between finger and thumb, "you're a very kind and charming mistress to them. I can't free half the household and not the others. Let's forget it."

As he bent down to kiss her cool lips he missed the spark of triumph that lit up her eyes.

When he first beheld Tessa in her mother's arms and saw his tiny daughter open her blue eyes and stare wonderingly at him, Roscoe felt that fortune had come to stay with him. With the advent of the wee mite into the Oakwood household it seemed to Roscoe that life held a new purpose for him, it seemed as though Tessa had bound him with chains of love more firmly than ever to his home, and the first rumblings of war were heard far

away as though in a dream that any moment would vanish in reality.

But on his next trip down to New Orleans, where every second month he presided over his company's board meeting, the threat of war was brought home to him. The talk of Secession, of the freedom of the South, which had filled the columns of the papers for so long that he had given up reading the heavy, indignant editorials, now blazed forth in fury against the aggression of the Yankees, and the name of Lincoln grew hateful in the hot mouths of his business friends. The echo of the guns that lowered the Union flag in Charleston harbour had scarce died away, the rallying of the North at the insult of Sumter had scarce found time to collect itself, when the declaration of war between the States had riven men's hearts, turned families against families and sons against fathers up and down the continent of America. In the streets of New Orleans, in the Bourse and the Corn Exchange, in the bar of the "Palmetto" and in offices and drawing-rooms, Roscoe was brought face to face with the indignation of the South. Secession, freedom, a government of Confederate States free from the harsh yoke of the Yankee dictators, a Southern government for the peoples of the South, with a Southern-born gentleman as its president: there was little else talked of in the city where he presided over his meeting and aboard the *Vidalia* when he returned home.

One thing was certain, he told himself, as the lordly sidewheeler threshed her way up against the yellow current, it would be far better for the Southern States to break away like this from the Union, and as the rebellion would not last more than a few weeks, or a month or two at the most, it would probably hardly affect river traffic at all. It might even bring more trade to the Southern cities through New Orleans, and he foresaw with the development of the South as a free country the Telegraph

Steam Packet Company reaping an even richer harvest.

He smiled inwardly when he thought of Old Hickey's face as they stood talking after the board meeting.

"Gosh darn my pants, Roscoe," the old man had exclaimed, shaking his stick in his fist, "if any of those goddam Yankees bring one of their boats down the Mississipp' and I'm fortunate enough to be around just then, my, I'll set the old *Magnolia* at 'em and ram their blasted guts out. Yes, sir."

But Roscoe could not share the view of Dave Warner.

"This business of secession", Warner had said thoughtfully, turning his cigar over and gazing at it, "isn't going to be as easy as it looks, mark my words, Torrence. I've an idea Lincoln will be prepared to fight to keep these States in the Union just as much as Jeff Davis and our hot-headed friends'll fight for their liberty. It's going to be a mighty big revolution and God knows what effect it'll have on steamboating. I shouldn't wonder if the Government commandeer all the boats."

Home, Varna's face lifted to be kissed; Tessa's tiny soft hands, Varna's look of pleasure as he unwrapped the costly gift he had brought from Orleans, home . . . that was what really mattered. To hell with wars and revolutions and Southern hot heads and Yankee propaganda, thought Roscoe, he had a lovely wife, he was in love with her, he was a father, and he intended to settle down now and enjoy his own home life. He was in love with his wife. Yes, but when he stopped to think about it he had to confess that he didn't understand her. Since the day they had returned from their honeymoon tour to Lake Pontchartrain, Savannah and Charleston, and begun their life together at Oakwood, Varna had managed his home for him with the skill of a born housekeeper; she had looked after his wishes, seen that the servants behaved and waited on the master of the house with quiet efficiency and done all that the mistress of a man's house-

hold could be expected to do. No fault could be found with the way she studied his comforts and organized their social background, his home. And whether Varna sat erect in her chair of an evening, her head bent over her sewing, or presided at the end of the supper table before a gathering of neighbours and friends, Roscoe had to admit that he possessed one of the most vivacious, certainly the most striking, wives in Vicksburg.

Possessed? His wife? He had never really possessed her, he thought as he glanced down the table with its colourful array of scintillating glass and silver and rich red mahogany, past the animated faces of their friends, their guests and watched the mellow light of the candles playing in her hair, softening the lines of her mouth. That lovely woman at the head of his table, talking so merrily to the lady on her left, had allowed herself to be married to him, had undertaken to fulfil her outward duties in his home, had never yet refused him when he desired to express his passion for her, but all the time he had been conscious of a barrier of reserve between them that as yet he had not succeeded in breaking down.

And he had tried. God knows, he had tried with all the patience and forbearance he was capable of. From the day she had stood beside him on the gallery at Lorrimer Hall, silent erect and stately in her white bridal dress, with her chin up and her eyes looking steadily in front of her while old Mr. Pollock had mumbled the Benediction and some of the ladies openly sobbed, he had treated her gently and courteously. He had been patient and tender with her, thinking her reserve was due to innate shyness; he had refrained from doing anything to shock or hurt her in any way. Yet although she had put up with his advances upon her privacy, she never gave him that warm encouragement that a man craves in the woman he loves.

Frustrated in the companionship, the tender expression of love for which every nerve in his body, every cell of

his mind cried out, Roscoe began to drink more than usual. It was one way, he found to obliterate the gnawing disappointment of something he realized about his inner life and yet dared not acknowledge openly—the knowledge of failure. If Varna had wanted to punish him for dragging her from the arms of Duquesne and marrying her, she had indeed succeeded. The girl he had fallen in love with at Lorrimer Hall, the tender, generous-hearted girl he had held in his arms as they had sat on that seat in the moonlight that unforgettable night in September, the Varna Quillon he had thought he knew, was no longer. Varna, his wife, was outwardly the same; her face to him was as beautiful, with that limpid expression that sometimes came into her eyes, her hair was just as lovely and full of fire, but beneath the adorable exterior a different personality looked out when her eyes became hard and turned away. Cruel as it seemed he had to admit it: he had married her against her will, and in her innermost heart was engraven not the image of her husband, but the face of Franklyn Duquesne.

Lucy came to stay with them more frequently after Tessa was born, and as Roscoe remarked to Varna in their own room one night, if the wee mite had been Lucy's own child she could not have bestowed more love and care on her. To which Varna remarked that she liked Lucy to have the child part of the day as she thought it was good for her, and really it was time Lucy thought of marrying and having one of her own, although why women *wanted* babies when they saw what having them did to their figures she was blessed if she could tell. Roscoe was glad to have Lucy in the house for he realized that there were times when Varna missed the frequent dinner and supper parties they had had during the first year of their married life, and the presence of her sister seemed to prevent her from fretting.

Feigning business to be seen to at the woodyard, or

another trip made necessary to New Orleans by the company, Roscoe kept out of the way a good deal of the time. But one evening Lucy found him alone in the front room while Varna was keeping to her own room pleading a sick headache. She sat down on the horsehair sofa beside him, her dress making a gentle rustle of taffeta as she spread it around her.

"Roscoe," she began, laying her cool fingers lightly on his arm. "You're not happy, are you?"

He looked into Lucy's trustful blue eyes a moment, and turned away.

"What makes you think that?" he parried.

"I can see you're not." She suddenly clutched his arm. "Oh Roscoe, what is it? Why aren't you and Varna happy? You—you love her, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I can see that. You're so kind to her. And Varna loves you."

He turned and faced her then.

"You think so?"

"Why—" she stared, "why yes, Roscoe. I know she loves you."

"I wish to God I could believe that."

"Oh Roscoe you *must* believe it. My sister would never tell me a lie, and she told me she's so much in love."

Roscoe shook his head, clasping his hands between his knees.

"Perhaps that's true, Lucy. But it's not with me."

"Don't say that, Roscoe, please don't. It's not right to say things like that. You can't really mean it, can you?"

"I sometimes think I made a terrible mistake," he said, "when I made her marry me against her will. I thought Varna was in love with me and that that other fellow was just—well, that she'd forget about him. But I guess I've been mistaken, that's all."

"Please don't say that, Roscoe," Lucy gazed at him with a hurt expression. "I'm sure Varna's forgotten about him now. It's only, I suppose poor dear Varna's not quite certain of herself. You know the way she is, so headstrong and so changeable. Maybe she hasn't gotten used to the change in her life yet, for you know", she blushed, dropping her eyes, "having a husband does change a girl's life so."

"I wish I could believe it was only that. I'd be prepared to wait." He leant forward, staring at the floor while Lucy watched him, and her heart ached to take his head in her hands to run her fingers through his hair.

"Roscoe." Her hand stole into his while her heart beat so she was afraid he might feel her racing pulse. The warmth of his big hand sent a thrill of pleasure coursing up her spine. "Roscoe," she said scarcely above a whisper. "I—I, too, love you."

He looked at her then, gripping her hand. But she turned her head away, fearful lest he should see the look in her eyes.

"Lucy," he murmured when he could speak, "Lucy, do you mean that?"

"Yes."

"But—but," words almost failed him. "How long have you——"

"Ever since that day you brought poor Papa home, and I saw you step out of the carriage. But," she faltered, biting her lip, "you never seemed to notice me."

"Oh Lucy, how blind I've been," he exclaimed. "What a self-centred fool I am not to have realized!"

"No, no Roscoe," she answered him, forcing a smile. "You fell in love with Varna. I understood." She looked so frail and flowerlike beside him, her eyes closed and her dark lashes resting on her cheek, that he slipped an arm about her shoulders. "I ought never to have spoken of this to you. But when I saw you looking so unhappy I—

I felt—oh Roscoe, I just couldn't keep silent any longer.” Suddenly her reserve broke down and she clung to him burying her face against his sleeve and sobbing convulsively. “Oh Roscoe, I can't bear to see you unhappy. I can't bear it. I love you so much that I only desire your happiness. I want you and Varna to be so happy together.”

He let her cry in his arms while he pressed his cheek against her soft hair, puzzled and bewildered yet with a sensation of tender joy coming to life within him as the scent of her hair filled him with longing.

“Lucy, if only I'd known, if only I hadn't been such a sightless fool.” He began to stroke her hair gently, whispering tenderly. “A man has no control over his heart when it has been torn as mine has. And now—I can offer you so little.”

“I only ask that you shall be happy, Roscoe.”

“You are the sweetest, most unselfish angel,” he exclaimed smiling down at her.

“And then”, she faltered looking away, “there's Tessa. Varna may let me come and look after Tessa sometimes. She's so adorable, Roscoe, and—and she's your child. I adore her if only because of that.”

“My darling,” he whispered in wonder.

She lifted her face to look up at him and he caught her suddenly, pressing his lips against hers. Her hands stole around behind his head and with a sudden intake of breath Lucy held him fiercely to her while her warm lips surrendered themselves to him. She became limp in his arms while he kissed her hungrily, holding her so close that she gasped for breath. Then suddenly she drew back, pressing her fingers against his mouth.

“No, Roscoe, no,” she gasped, her face crimson. “We mustn't do this. It's wicked.” She stood up, smoothing the folds of her dress while her eyes avoided his. “We must never, never do that again. It was my fault. I ought never to have told you.” He caught her hand and pressed

the palm to his lips. The rough feel of his chin sent a shiver of ecstasy through her, but she tried to pull her hand away. "Please let me go. Please, Roscoe. I don't know what you must think of me, saying what I did. I just couldn't help it when you looked so unhappy."

"I'm happy now, my darling."

Her other hand stole through his hair.

"Dear Roscoe. You must forgive me, and let me go now."

But he held her hand more tightly.

"There's nothing to forgive," he told her urgently. "It was beautiful and kind of you to tell me this. I was so blind and stupid not to have realized before. And now, Lucy my precious, you have brought happiness into my life. I know now what I've missed all these years, what I've lacked. Please don't try to draw your hand away from me. Let me hold it a little longer. You have brought me what I have never had before—real love, the pure love of a good woman. Oh Lucy, how grateful I am to you for it."

"But how can you say that, Roscoe? Varna's your wife and you love her, don't you?"

A look of pain shot into his eyes and he answered as though the words hurt him.

"You don't understand how things are between us? You are her sister and might have guessed. Varna doesn't love me. I know now she never did. She married me because I bullied her into it. I just have myself to blame for it, for not realizing how different you would have been, Lucy, if only I'd not been such a blind fool." He pressed her hand against his cheek. "You could have given me so many things, such great happiness, Lucy. And now it's too late."

"Please, please don't say that, Roscoe. We have a beautiful friendship. Don't let us spoil that for it is the most precious thing. If only you are happy with Varna,

happy with your darling child, I shall feel contented. Don't let us talk of what might have been."

Roscoe looked up into her face. "If you were not such a beautiful character, Lucy," he said slowly, "I would ask you to bring me happiness in other ways."

"Oh Roscoe." It was almost an anguished cry and her eyes filled with tears. "Please, oh please don't ask that. You know I couldn't. Even if Varna were not my sister I just couldn't do that—ever. You surely understand that, don't you?"

"Of course, my darling," he told her, pressing her hand to his flushed cheek. "I'd never even suggest such a thing. I only said if you were not such a beautiful character." He kissed her palm again, closing his eyes.

She stood very still looking down at him, her heart beating with mixed emotions. In any other circumstances she would have flung an angry reply at him and swept from the room and never come to the house again. Instead she had been filled with a mixture of pain that he should have even contemplated such a suggestion to her, and of anticipation at the thought of what life would be like if she had been more wanton and gladly flung herself into his arms. Watching his firm capable hands and his broad powerful shoulders Lucy experienced a thrill of excitement as she imagined surrendering herself to him.

"Poor dear Roscoe," she whispered. "I would give you all I possess to make you happy—but that. We can do nothing. Our lives are in God's hands and we can only ask Him to help us live them with honesty and purity and goodness. That things should be like this seems cruel. I know how cruel it seems to you, my dear, but we are given this cross to bear for the good of our souls. Let us not be weak and shrink from our duty. Don't think ill of me, Roscoe, I beg of you, for being a foolish girl and telling you what was in my heart. My only wish is that you and Varna and—and Tessa", her voice almost broke,

"shall be united with love and happiness. That is my prayer, Roscoe."

Unable to say more, Lucy bent down and kissed the back of his head. And when he looked up again, she was gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

WINTER retreated before the youthful smile of spring. The garden changed almost perceptibly from a scene of destruction, where the bodies of last year's plants lay sodden and rotting. Gaunt trees, washed by winter's tears, drew on a cloak of green and with an unexpected burst of warm weather the first of the daffodils lifted its pale face to the sunshine.

Far up the Missouri the snows were melting on the slopes of Montana, the white cloak was moving slowly but surely off the face of the earth in Nebraska, and the flood waters of the wild North West were mingling in their way to the Gulf, until the Mississippi swelled with fury and burst its levees.

Sloshing up to his knees in gumboots, Roscoe worked with the sawmill-hands retrieving the floating stacks of lumber while the yellow flood gurgled and sucked around them. The river had topped the levee and half the wood-yard was under water.

"Ole ribber'm riz higher nor what Ah nevah see befo'," remarked Jake as Roscoe directed his headman in their task. "Ef she gwine a riz any mo' Ah reckon we gotta mak' a raf' outer dese yer logs. Dey ont be no land dis time to-morrow."

There was no knowing what trick old Mississippi had up his sleeve. Another two-foot rise, Roscoe calculated would put the sawmill and the engine-house itself under water, and there would then be no holding the logs which they were now laboriously piling up beyond the reach of

the flood. Fifteen thousand dollars' worth of lumber would go floating off with the flotsam of uprooted trees and rail fences and dead cattle and hogs and deserted cabins that even now drifted down helplessly on the bosom of the flood.

Glancing across the water as he worked he could see it seething and boiling around a giant oak that had dug its roots into the tow head lying covered half a mile from the shore. The branches of the tree were sawing up and down, up and down like the arms of a man writhing in agony, and he wondered, as he watched a dark object like a chicken coop catch in its branches, turn over and swing clear on its headlong career, how long this big sawyer would hold its roots there.

Far away over towards the dark line of trees that rose from the water where the Louisiana shore lay buried, a sternwheeler was puffing her way slowly over the shoal water, breasting the current with all the power she could muster. She was the first steamboat Roscoe had seen all day, for trade on the river had fallen away as sand trickles through the fingers. The defiant rising in South Carolina had not brought Washington to respect the demands of the Secessionists. Nearly a year had gone by since Fort Sumter was in the columns of every newspaper, and the North had brought threats, reprisals and an unexpected ruthlessness to bear on the South. The Yankee hordes had had their first taste of Southern marksmanship at the battle of Manassas Junction towards the end of the summer; they had retreated to lick their wounds and nothing much had happened during the winter beyond the weekly explosions in the Press. In Vicksburg the local militia had been drilling for weeks behind the batteries under the barking orders of a bearded corporal. A company of gentlemen's sons in new grey uniforms had ridden through the city and past the Torrences' home with sabres rattling and merry eyes searching the girls who fluttered handker-

chiefs from the front yards, the boys' shouts had filled the streets as they cantered past.

Half-hidden behind the curtains of her front room Varna watched them go by, her handkerchief ready to wave, her heart beating with the pride of a mother when men who are only boys ride out to battle. Among them she recognized so many proud young faces: there were the two Melville brothers, and fair-haired Frank Davis—he was a distant relation of President Davis whose Brierfield Plantation was but a few miles farther down the river, bless his heart—and there, holding back his spirited chestnut with a jaunty grin on his dark features, was that daredevil Granville boy. He had been the first to give her anything more exciting than a polite brotherly kiss under the mistletoe. That must have been four years ago, and though she had allowed since then, well—she wasn't quite certain how many men, to kiss her at dances and parties, the sight of Ned Granville now, years and years older, more erect, more self-assured, a strong hardy man riding to war, his mischievous eyes flashing in his tanned face, made her heart beat all the faster. A girl could not but feel proud when the flower of youth rode forth like that to protect her and her home, and her heart swelled with gratitude to the little band of men as they trotted past. Then she caught her breath and her hand unconsciously leapt to her breast, for at the head of another company of horsemen, more orderly, more disciplined than the others, she recognized the erect figure sitting the tall grey, his lean face set and his dark eyes looking neither to the left nor right. She stood very still and white.

"They're a magnificent body of men," said a voice behind her and she turned with a sharp intake of breath to find Roscoe in the room. "Sorry, my darling, if I made you jump," he added laying his hand gently on her shoulder and giving her an enigmatical smile. She felt as

though his keen eyes were penetrating to her heart and she wanted to hide for very shame. "I happened to hear them passing and came in to see. They look as though they were all born in the saddle, don't they?"

"Yes," she breathed, scarcely above a whisper.

"I doubt whether our Yankee friends'll be able to put men like that in the field——"

"Friends!" Varna's nerves seemed to break and she faced him angrily, all hope of reserve gone. "You call them friends! You would. You can stand there and make complimentary remarks while *they* go off to fight for the South, you can stay at home and admire them while they go off to protect our Southern womanhood. But what do *you* do? You just stay here and talk of 'our Yankee friends' like they were brothers and ought to be loved. You're nothing but an abolitionist and I don't believe you'd raise a finger to save a single Southern woman from death or rape at Yankee hands. Why don't you go and join your Yankee friends?" Her voice became almost shrill and her face twisted as though in pain until her expression was almost ugly. "Why don't you go and shake hands with that gorilla in the White House? Why don't you?"

They stood close together facing one another, she with her cheeks flushed, her lower lip drooping and her bosom rising and falling with the intensity of her emotion, while he stared down at her with a grim expression. The room was silent but for her laboured breathing.

"That was very unnecessary," he said at last. "You know that we shall probably be ruined if this war lasts another year, whether the South wins her freedom or not. There's scarcely any trade on the river now, and if the war doesn't end soon there won't be anything at all for us steamboat-owners."

"That's all you think of," she flashed at him, "whether your wretched company's going to make any money or not."

"A certain amount of money, I find, is necessary," he said coolly, "with an establishment like this one. It needs occasional financial backing, you know."

"So you think I'm extravagant, do you?" she flashed at him. "Pray let me tell you this——"

"Not at all. You're an excellent manager, Varna. Excellent!"

"Thank you for no compliment."

"And you are a perfect hostess and—and mother."

"I don't appreciate your sarcasm."

"But, now we have brought up the subject of economy, I'd like to suggest that we really don't need an army of servants to run this place. There're at least a dozen in the kitchen and the backyard we could manage without."

"And what difference does that make to you, pray?"

"We've got to economize somehow," he explained patiently, "for I warn you, Varna, money's going to be very scarce before long, I, for one, shall probably cease to make any."

"And so you'd turn half the servants away? What do you propose to do with them?"

"I'd see they were freed before they left."

Varna threw up her hands.

"There you go again. You'd make them freedmen. And then what would they do? What could poor old Ted and Massie and Jim and Uncle Mose and Emma and the others do if they *were* free? Where could they go? How can you expect the poor things to keep themselves by working? Nobody wants to employ a freed nigger. They're too expensive and so uppity you can't get them to work. They'd just starve down in those frightful cabins under the levee, or else they'd just come back home and you'd have to keep them just the same."

"You know how I feel about owning slaves, Varna."

"Oh I know you're a true abolitionist," she retorted bitingly. "My God, must we go through all this again?

Why you live in the South is beyond me. Why don't you free all our negroes and lead them all to your Yankee friends in the North? I'm sure they'd be delighted to welcome you. I can see that man Lincoln shaking hands with you, and Mrs. Beecher Stowe laying a laurel wreath on your brow."

Roscoe put his head back and emitted his hearty laugh. Then he caught hold of her shoulders and shook her playfully.

"You're a magnificent little spitfire," he said mockingly, "and I love you when you look furious like that. You must get it from your Russian ancestry. It makes me feel all chivalrous."

She tore herself away from his hands.

"If you had a spark of chivalry in you," she flared at him, "you'd be going along with those brave boys to help fight for us Southern women."

He gave her a searching look.

"There are other things a man can do as well as ride about yelling like that. Besides," he added nonchalantly, "I don't think their gallant commander and I would hit it off too well."

Then she realized he had seen Franklyn as they passed. She dropped her eyes and turned away. Roscoe was about to touch her arm, but let his hand fall by his side.

"It seems a pity", he said in a low voice, "that whenever you see him we have a quarrel."

"I couldn't help seeing him," she exclaimed, swinging round and facing him. "I didn't know they were his—his company." She bit her lip.

"He still has a sad effect on you, Varna."

"Oh don't let's talk about it," she turned away. "I've not seen him—oh Roscoe, you must believe me. I've not heard anything of him since you—since——"

"Since that day of our wedding?"

She nodded.

He went to the window and stared out at the street, clasping his hands behind him.

"But you still love him." His voice was very quiet.

She was silent.

"Don't you, Varna?"

"Oh." The agonized cry seemed to be wrung from her lips. "Oh, I don't know. Please, please let's forget it."

"I would give all I possess in the world if we both could forget it. But you still love him."

"No." She hesitated, clutching wildly at the words. "No, I don't now, Roscoe. I don't. I don't."

He swung round and gripped her wrist.

"Don't play act, Varna," he said, sharply. "You're not in love with me. You never have been. When I thought that night in the garden at the Hall you loved me, you were only acting."

"No. No. Roscoe, I——"

"You can't help acting. It's part of your nature, and it gave you a sense of power. It was a real little triumph that night to have me at your feet begging you to love me a little, to marry me, to make me believe you loved me as I loved—as I still love you."

"It's not true, Roscoe! Oh you must believe me. I did love you, a little——"

"A little." He gave a harsh laugh.

"Oh more than a little. You were so sweet and good and because you were a stranger I—I suppose I felt sorry for you and couldn't help letting you marry me."

"Because you were just sorry for me—a stranger in a strange land?" She sensed the bitterness behind the words.

"Oh Roscoe, I'm sorry. Do forgive me. I had gotten so bewildered that I didn't know what I was doing half the time. I couldn't—I just couldn't disappoint you that night you asked me to marry you, and later when you went to New Orleans and sent me those sweet, sweet letters I just hadn't the courage to tell you what a terrible

mistake it would be. And when you came back with those lovely presents and every one knew about it——” she threw out her hands, “what *could* I do? I couldn’t tell Papa that I didn’t know whether I wanted to marry you or not. And when he—when Franklyn came that morning and told me he had his carriage outside and reservations on the cars for New Orleans and that he’d shoot any one who stood in the way of our getting married, I couldn’t help myself.” A wistful light came into her face then and, seeing it, Roscoe’s eyes became hard.

“Well, you won’t have to act much longer,” he said grimly, “I’m leaving for New Orleans to-morrow and I don’t know when I shall be back. Perhaps not till this war’s over.”

She searched his face, a sudden feeling of loneliness taking possession of her. With Franklyn gone and now Roscoe going, she dreaded to think what life would be like. Oh God, don’t let him go and leave me, she thought, don’t let him leave me like this.

“But why are you going?” she asked controlling her voice with an effort.

“The Government need ships—you remember I told you, that the Confederate States haven’t a real navy at all? —and our own boats are going to be fitted up for war service. I’m going along, and”, he added with a wry smile, “perhaps a stray shell will come along and leave you free to——”

“Oh no, don’t say that,” she cried, clutching his arm. “Don’t, please don’t, think that of me.” She buried her face against his sleeve and broke into sobs. “Roscoe, I’m terribly, terribly sorry for all this. I wouldn’t have caused you so much pain for anything, but everything has been too much for me, I can’t bear to let you go.”

She saw his lips part, revealing the whiteness of his teeth.

“Well, well, and five minutes ago you wanted me to

scamper after those brave boys," he laughed mockingly. Then he became serious again. "I've decided for several reasons that it would be better for every one if I go away for a few months. Don't ask just why," he added, seeing her about to speak, "say it's just to work the Vicksburg air out of my system, or that I'm a hopeless rover with itching feet and just can't be kept at home at all. You ought not to be lonely. You'll be able to go and stay at Lorrimer when you like, and—" he looked away, "Lucy will be able to stay here with you."

"But I can't help being lonely without you."

"That", he said bowing with a forced grin, "is a suitable sentiment for a young wife to express. But to my ears it rings as true as a bad half-crown. I mean ha'f dolluh. Listen Varna. You may not love me, but you're my wife and the mother of my child. You may never learn to regard me with anything except amazement but you will look after Tessa, won't you? It seems as if Tessa will be all we may ever hope to have in common."

She lifted her face and he saw that her lips were twisted in agony.

"Roscoe, don't say that," she cried as he folded her in his arms. "Why, oh why must you leave me so soon?"

He bent down and kissed her cheek.

"Because", he said gently, "although I am, as you say, nothing but a horrid abolitionist, I have a Southern wife and a Southern home and, I suppose, an insular dislike of other aggressive nations. I feel that if I can't get aboard one of my boats and have at least one crack at those gaddam Yanks, I'll just bust!"

CHAPTER XXIV

FULLY a week went by before Varna quite realized what Roscoe intended to do, and when she did a sense of grievance stole over her. From the first she had resented his sudden decision to go down to New Orleans on some business in connection with his wretched steamboats. She could not see any reason why he should go off and leave her for two or three weeks like that, and the night before he left she did her best to show her resentment. Beneath his self-possessed exterior he was solicitous for her comfort and unusually attentive, and she knew that he wanted her. She could read the desire in his eyes, although she knew he was doing his best not to show it. It would not be like Roscoe to go on his knees and beg a favour of her; even that. And she deliberately withheld herself from him, eventually falling into an uninterrupted sleep with a comfortable sense of satisfaction warming her. He had not awakened her.

In the morning when he had held little Tessa in his arms for a long time and kissed the child's smiling mouth, setting her down in her cot again with a tender look in his eyes, he drew Varna into the living-room.

"You haven't read the papers lately," he said as though speaking gently to a fractious child, "but you may as well know that there's a mild panic in New Orleans. They say there are Yankee gunboats off the Delta and the Mississippi looks like getting bottled up."

"Then why are you going there?" she asked, although now, she told herself she really didn't care. "What's the sense in that?"

"The Confederate Government", he replied patiently, "are badly needing ships, steamboats that they can turn into ironclads. You see, Varna, this war started before Jeff Davis and the rest of the politicians realized that gunboats would be needed and they hadn't got a fleet at all. We are handing—that is the Telegraph Packet Line—are handing over the *Magnolia* to the Naval authorities for them to turn into a gunboat."

"I should think you will be thankful to be rid of that tiresome old boat."

"Don't you believe it," he told her, laughing. "Such is the affection I have for the *Magnolia* I'm going to New Orleans myself to help man her when she becomes a fully fledged war vessel. And also to see about selling our other boats to the Government."

"But surely you could leave Mr. Warner to fix all that," she said pouting. "Haven't you enough to occupy you at home with the woodyard and the garden? Why must you go away and leave me to look after the place alone? Don't you ever think of anything but your stupid old steam-boats?"

"If you understood how urgently the Government—your own Government my dear—are needing gunboats and men, and what a dreadful thing it would be for the Confederacy if New Orleans and the mouth of the Mississippi fell into the hands of the Yankees, you'd say I was the most helpful, not to mention patriotic, Englishman that you'd ever known, instead of standing there looking like a small girl that's been told to go back and wash behind the ears." She turned her head away pouting. "Don't you see how it would affect *you*?" he added, regarding her with a twinkle in his eyes. "Don't you see that it would bring on a shortage of everything you like—clothes and hats from London, shoes, silks and satins and books and—"

"Papa has plenty of books."

"And all manner of things you think now you couldn't be without. Why, it's only to save our ever so charming womenfolk such inconvenience that many of us men are going to help the Confederacy and possibly even fight for it. Chivalry, my dearest Varna, pure, unadulterated chivalry." He patted her shoulder lightly. "Doesn't that make you proud of us—noble Southern gentlemen that we are?"

"I think it's stupid to talk like that," she said, ignoring his bantering mood. "And it's unkind of you to walk out on me like this and leave me here alone, just to go and see about a lot of silly gunboats. Why must it concern you?"

"Darling, I've felt it coming for some time, this urge to be patriotic, to do something for the Johnny Rebs, to sacrifice my own peace and security for my wife's country. What else could I do, when I think of the reward that awaits me when I come back home, the generous love, the tender affection, the warmth of——"

Varna turned to go but he stood in front of her with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"Last night I had half a mind to rape you," he said lowering his voice. "I wish now I had. You behaved like a little spoilt child with your sulks and vapours, and it would have done you good. Women", he added wickedly as she recoiled, "were made to be dominated and hurt. And by God, for two pins I'd give you a hiding now—if it weren't for the servants," He suddenly caught her by the shoulders and held her at arms' length, looking into her face, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a triumphant grin. "Look at me, Varna, and don't sulk. I may be gone some time. How long I don't know. It depends on what I have to do and how long this war's going to last. I'll just say this: I'm leaving Uncle Ben to look after you and Tessa, and you'll have Katie Lou and her husband, Cal, so that you'll have some one in the house you may rely

on. And I'll write whenever I can. I hope you will occasionally think about me. Good-bye, Varna, my adorable loving wife."

He drew her close and kissed her lips. She felt a weakness coming into her knees and for an instant longed to throw her arms about his neck and cry for forgiveness on his shoulder, but he had already released her and, with a curious expression in his face that she didn't quite understand, closed the door behind him.

"What possessed him to run off like that," she thought long after he had gone. "Why *must* he for ever be wanting to rush up and down the river as if somebody's chasing him all the time? He doesn't think of me, left here to cope with this house and the servants all by myself. I feel I'm going to cry. I can't sit here and cry all by myself. I never like to cry by myself. It's like going into a churchyard to die. I wish I had Aunt Mitty here. Nobody lets me cry like she does. I've a good mind to go home. That would make him sit up if he came back here and found the place locked up. As if I meant what I said about his joining the army! He does take things so seriously. And that remark about Franklyn." She sighed and her heart quickened as a flood of memories rushed across her mind. "I wonder where he is now? His regiment's way up in Tennessee now, I expect, and he's sure to be at the head of it. I wish I had a letter from him. Even a short note. Why doesn't he write? It would be quite all right. After all, gentlemen can write to other people's wives, and now Roscoe's away it wouldn't matter. . . . If he would only write and tell me where he is, what he's doing, and if they've been in any battles yet. Franklyn," mentally she seemed to roll her tongue lusciously over the name. "Franklyn is sure to be in the thick of the fighting. I'm glad they're in Tennessee, though, for they'll stop the Yankees coming closer. If Franklyn and his men had been up there before, the Yankees would never have captured those forts on the

Tennessee river—or is it the Cumberland? I don't remember. I can just imagine his dear face when he sees the Yankees and gives the order to charge. How brave and glorious he looks on his horse. I wish I was a soldier so I could be there and see him. No, if I were a soldier I'd have to be a man and then I'd have gotten only a man's regard for him. And that wouldn't be nearly so thrilling. Although they do say that in some of those armies in Europe in ancient times—the Macedons or the Syrians or something—they formed affectionate attachments for each other. I don't know what one man could see to love in another, but when armies are always on the march or fighting or something all over the place, away from home for years at a time, and they've got no women to make love to, I suppose they do get a little fond of each other . . . but really I ought not to think about things like that. I'm sure Franklyn and his fine men. . . ." She smiled in retrospect. "How too wonderful and handsome he looked that last time when they rode past. If only Roscoe hadn't come into the room I believe I might have run after him and asked him to write to me. No, I just couldn't have done that. But oh, how I do wish he would write—just a teeny weeny note would do, just to say where he is. If he ever got wounded. . . . Oh my, if I thought he was lying wounded on the battlefield I do believe I'd run and find him. I couldn't help it. I know I'd find him if he were wounded and needed me. If only he would write to me sometimes. I would write him long, long letters like I was his sister, only better ones than a sister would write."

Roscoe's first letter was not encouraging about an early return. Indeed he hinted that far from this rebellion being settled in a few months it appeared to be growing much more serious each day.

"There is much more to be done here than I thought," he wrote. "They've rigged up a temporary shipyard and the ironworks are working at full blast turning a number

of the steamboats into ironclads. There seems to be very little iron to be had, and we are rigging up the *Magnolia* with thick oak bulkheads around her boilers and engines and laying a sheet of iron over the outside. I don't know what they expect the Yankees to do, but there's a lot of excitement here and Canal Street's full of rumours of news of victories. They don't seem to expect a raid on New Orleans for we're over a hundred miles from the mouth of the river and they say it's well boomed. But there's a rumour that there are several Yankee cruisers off the Delta and I think they might try to rush the boom defence one night. Some of our men are taking the *Sarah*—the oldest sternwheeler on the river I think—down to the Head of the Passes to-morrow to lay a lot more 'torpedoes'. They are tin cans full of powder, and our men sink them on moorings like channel buoys. I expect they'll keep the Yankees away from the river, for if a ship hits one of them she gets blown up.

"I don't know just what duties we shall be given in the *Magnolia*, but Captain Hickman (you remember 'Old Hickey'? He sends his respectful good wishes) is beside himself with excitement and wants to take the boat out into the Gulf and engage the Yankee fleet single-handed! He is an old fathead, but I can't help liking him, and he's got a lot of pluck even if most of it does come out of a bottle. You will scarcely recognize me when you see me next—though when that will be the Lord only knows—the authorities are doling out uniforms to all volunteers and as soon as they find one long enough to fit me (I take so much material you see) I shall be suitably arrayed. Old Hickey has his already and you should see him trying to make the buttons meet around his stomach!

"The wharves here are a pathetic sight. Nobody expected the Yankees would send their ships into the Gulf like this and stop all shipping so soon. The quays are lined with seagoing ships well laden and ready to leave

for England and Canada and all over the world, but none dare go. If this war does go on through this summer I don't know how your father will get his cotton shipped to England. You see, dear, the ships can't leave the river. And there are hundreds of sad-looking steamboats packed along the wharves with fires drawn and not a soul aboard. There isn't any trade, and I shouldn't be surprised if we have to sell our fine new *Vidalia* and the *Telegraph* to the Naval Department or else lease them. *Tidewater*, Mr. Warner tells me, is up the Red River at Shreveport, getting some freight to bring down here; but there's nothing to be got with the other boats."

Boats, freights, business. Did he ever think of anything else? Varna shuffled the closely written sheets impatiently and ran her eye down the last page. Yes he asked how Tessa was, whether she could say "pa-pa" yet and was still his bonny little daughter. Well, if he wanted to know, Tessa had a cold and she might herself get it if she saw too much of the child. She had told him that Oakwood was a damp house—you could see that by the way the paper was peeling off the wall in the dining-room—and it was small too, much smaller than Lorrimer with its spacious rooms. Well, if he really wanted to know, his daughter was sneezy and moist and fretful, and Katie Lou didn't seem to understand how to look after the child. And he asked about her, his wife. It was nice of him to say how much he missed her and to promise to bring her something very special from New Orleans when he came home. That was all very well, but how long would he be, and how long did he expect her to stay here by herself while he enjoyed himself in New Orleans society and had bulkboards or whatever it was nailed all over his silly old boat? She really did begin to feel she would have to go back home, but she was not entirely sure what Auntie Debs would say if she did.

His next letter a week later held out no sure promise

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His next letter a week later held out no sure promise

that he would soon be home. She read it almost angrily.

"My dear wife," he wrote in his difficult handwriting (English people she used to say, all wrote alike; so you just couldn't read it, only being a doctor made his writing even worse). "Everything is in a state of great excitement here, and as soon as the *Magnolia* is ready we expect to be ordered to proceed down the river on patrol duty. I have been given the rank of temporary lieutenant and have the letters C.S.N.—Confederate States Navy—on my shoulder-straps now. Old Hickey is if anything, even redder in the face since he became a naval man and his nose positively radiates bellicose rays! I thought, though, he paled a little yesterday when we were told we might be ordered *up* river to help prevent the Yankees coming down below the Ohio. They say Grant has a pretty strong force as well as some well-armed steamboats and it may take us all our time to keep them in Tennessee. But our army will see to that, so you need not lie awake when you put your pretty head on the pillow—except, perhaps, just to think of me and pray for me."

"The news has just come in about the sinking of the *Merrimac*. That's a sad blow, for every one here in Orleans was convinced we had a completely invincible ironclad at last. You will probably see an account of the fight in the *Appeal*. At any rate she sank several Yankee ships in Hampton Roads the day before yesterday. Important ships—frigates—too. And it was most unfortunate that the Yankees got their *Monitor* into the Roads yesterday. The artificers here say she is a new sort of floating gun platform that the Yankees are trying out. If a boat like the *Monitor* can destroy an ironbound shell like the *Merrimac*, Heaven help us, I say, if they bring half a dozen such stupendous vessels up the Mississippi. It's created something of a panic amongst a lot of people here, and they are urging the naval authorities to build gunboats as fast as they can. But as Captain Donelson said when I saw

him at the naval headquarters yesterday, we could build a complete navy of ironclads in three months if only we had more iron and more shipyards and shipwrights on the Mississippi. I've been almost driven to my wits' end trying to get delivery of the iron plating for the *Magnolia*. It's an inch thick and the people at the mills say they can't roll it in sufficient quantities. But what good even that will do if a Yankee shell does hit us amidships I don't know. . . ."

Varna dropped the letter in her lap and stared out of the window. A Yankee shell . . . amidships? It dawned on her that Roscoe might run some risk of being killed. The thought hadn't occurred to her before; she had imagined him merely staying in New Orleans, having work done at the shipyard. It had not occurred to her that he might have to go under shell fire. She suddenly felt constricted as though a damp cloth had wrapped itself around her heart and she found herself muttering a prayer: "Don't let him go off and get killed, please God, don't let him be taken away from me. Please let him come back, just to say good-bye—I didn't say good-bye properly to him when he went. I didn't mean to be unkind before he went, really I didn't, I suppose I was feeling poorly—no it wasn't that, of course, and I know he wanted me, but—oh I couldn't. I couldn't. But next time—please God let him come home to me so as I can show him I—well—that I'm proud of him and fond of him. Yes indeed I'm fond of him, and proud. So please, Lord, don't let me be left all alone here much longer."

But the last nine or ten days of March dragged by and it was April before she received another letter from him. Her heart fell when she saw that it was addressed "On board C.S.N.S. *Magnolia*. Bound for the Bayous," and she found herself idly wondering what C.S.N.S. meant. Why were men always so fond of using initials? If the C.S. stood for Confederate States what on earth could N.S.

be? She could only think of nonsense while her eyes took in her husband's barely legible writing.

"My dearest wife," she read, "By the time you receive this the *Magnolia* will be somewhere near the mouth of the Mississippi. We are leaving in half an hour's time and I am sending this ashore by the barge that is alongside now filling us up with cordwood. In addition to our armour plating—I feel a little like a medieval knight such as I told you about with all this iron plating around us—the authorities gave us two guns. I tried to get six, or four at the least, but they can't spare more than two. I also tried to have the *Magnolia* fitted with an ironshod ram such as they're putting on one or two of the other river boats. But Captain Donelson said there wasn't enough iron to go round, and we must therefore not try to ram an enemy ship. With only two small guns we're not a very formidable fighting unit. Our engines are very old and in a bad state, and as we're only good for eight knots now the naval authorities decided they wouldn't waste any more iron on us! But we're a lively crew and Old Hickey declared yesterday he'd fight the Yanks with only one gun if necessary and ram them with our wooden bow if he got a chance. But he didn't seem so sure to-day when we got our sailing orders *down* river instead of *up* as we had expected! He's on the Texas deck now storming up and down because the niggers are so slow getting the wood fuel aboard. The present pilot's a naval man and we have a small crew of gunners aboard. They have stacked bales of spoilt cotton along the decks outside the armour, so we ought to be well protected. The guns they say have been in the forts for donkey's years and the gunnery officer, a man called Harrison, says he doubts if they're accurate enough to hit a ship at more than a hundred yards' range! Harrison is a likeable chap and comes from Georgia, he tells me, and talks with calm soft broad accent (more pronounced even than your own, my pet!)."

Varna glanced down the page. When would he tell her, she wondered, what it was he was going to bring her from New Orleans. All his letter seemed to be about guns and steamboats and this stupid war. Not a word could she see about what he had been *doing* in New Orleans, any people he had met there—surely he might have seen the Green family or the Valettes—nor even when she might expect him to come home. Really all men seemed to be alike, she thought sighing, full of their deeds and plans, full of war talk and quite blind to what a girl really wanted to know. Would he even remember to bring her the gift he promised in his first letter? She wondered.

“Mr. Warner told me” (she read on), “he is negotiating with the Government for the charter of our three remaining boats. It’s a very great disappointment to me to break up the company like this after all the effort put into building it up, as I know you will understand. You remember how ambitious I was to own, one day, in addition to the loveliest wife in all the South, the largest fleet of fast steamboats on the Mississippi? The gods were kind and gave me the first, but alas the second has proved but a mirage so far. I dare say when the war is over. . . . As the people have a habit of saying down here ‘Leave that be, suh, till the waw is ovuh’. It’s been on almost a year now and I for one reason alone long for it to end—so that I may return to my home and hold my darling wife and child in my arms once more. Alas, it is not to be just yet. Duty calls and we are about to station ourselves at a place called the Head of the Passes a few miles below the two forts that protect the river just inside the Delta. If you look at the map in my room you will see where it is, where the channel from the mouth of the main river is met by two bayous that also run out through the Delta into the Gulf. You see, the Yankees may try slipping into the river through one of the bayous with a shallow draught steamer. The wood barge is all ready to leave

us now and I have no time to write more, Varna my dearest wife, except to say. . . ."

Varna closed her eyes. This letter had been written four days ago—it had taken that time to travel by rail and road via Jackson—and the *Magnolia* must now be down there near the fan-shaped delta of the Mississippi, with Yankee gunboats prowling up and down outside watching for a chance to rush the defences. She shuddered as she visualized a night attack and the dark shapes of the Yankee ships closing in on the fragile little paddle steamer. . . . Somehow while Roscoe was in danger she thought less about Franklyn, but when the vision of the slender suave cavalry officer entered her mind her pulse quickened and she seemed to be torn in agony between her duty and loyalty towards her husband guarding the Mississippi four hundred miles away in the South, and her craving to know what was happening to Franklyn on the battlefields away north in Tennessee.

Supposing Roscoe were to be killed. She tried to consider the possibility rationally, telling herself that she may as well be brave and face it. Supposing he were to be killed. She tried to think how she would receive the news. It would come in an official envelope, with the Confederate Government stamp on it, and before she opened it she would know what it contained. She tried to imagine what she would do. Roscoe killed. She would be a widow then, like thousands of others. Then, if Franklyn heard about it, surely he'd write to her. Write her a lovely tender letter of condolence from his camp, wherever that was, and she would send him a beautiful reply, full of sorrow and—well, she would write so that he would be bound to reply, and then in time she might suggest, or better still, it would occur to him to call on her when he came home on furlough, or the war ended, and then she—no she mustn't think such things. But if one's husband was killed, after all a girl would have to face life,

and she was still quite young, not twenty-two yet. First of all, of course, she would go into mourning. Black would suit her. It would set off the flame colour in her hair, and after a certain time if she put a little white lace about her neck and her jade brooch she would look—no she mustn't think about that either. She sat up suddenly.

"I can't live here, alone," she thought with determination, "just waiting for it to happen. I can't go on staying *here* alone. I'll close the house and go back home. I know Papa will agree with me—I can always get him to see my view, and even if Aunt Debby thinks I ought not to leave my husband's home like that I'll just have to explain things to her. Anyway, I'll write Roscoe to-night. A letter's sure to be delivered sometime, and he'll understand. I can't possibly go on living here waiting for God knows what to happen. It's not nice here and I think it would be better for Tessa at the Hall. Aunt Mitty's heaps better than Katie Lou and she'd care for Tessa. I shouldn't risk getting Tessa's cold and—I mean, a girl can't go on being a grass-widow in a house with nothing but servants around her, can she? I'm sure Auntie Debs will agree that it'll be better for Tessa. And I'll write to Roscoe and explain."

CHAPTER XXV

It seemed to Varna that some subtle change had come over life at Lorrimer. At first she could not say what it was. Her father seemed to her to have recovered from the steamboat accident; he had aged perceptibly, it was true, and the experience had left its mark on him in several ways. He walked with a limp that would probably stay by him to the day of his death, and he was not nearly so active in consequence, but he still rode every day and made his rounds of the plantation as he used to do, and with her he was still the merry delightful father who, when she was small, had taken her on his knee and taught her the names of the flowers in their garden and the trees in the bottom lands and read thrilling things to her out of boys' books about the pirate Lafitte and the early settlers in the Cajun country. He had always been her most exciting companion. But now there seemed to be a reserve in their relationship that she had never sensed before, as though she had returned from abroad to find her father altered in some intangible way.

Aunt Deborah welcomed her and Tessa home without reserve. "You ought to be mighty proud of him, my child," she exclaimed, kissing her niece.

"I suppose I am," Varna admitted, wondering.

"Of course you are. Indeed you ought to be, miss. There's no necessity for Dr. Torrence to go and fight for us even if they do expect England to come in on our side. Although I don't think for a moment she will."

"Why not, Auntie?" Varna didn't want to know, nor

cared, but she felt it wiser to humour her aunt for the present.

"Because, my child, the English have never been known to fight for any nation that has slavery eating at its core. And if I were a man I'd wager five dollars that Mr. Gladstone will not let England ally herself with a slave-owning government."

"But, Auntie, we're not fighting for our slaves, we're fighting for freedom."

"Stuff and nonsense, child," exclaimed Miss Deborah, "we shan't get any real freedom whichever way the war goes. But don't you bother your young head about such matters. You leave an old woman to do that. You be proud that your English husband should willingly go and fight for the Confederacy, despite his views," she added as an afterthought, "about slavery."

"But he's not going to fight, Auntie Debs, he's gone to New Orleans to sell his steamboats to the Government."

"Fi, fi, and nonsense," exclaimed the elderly lady shortly. "Your husband, young lady, isn't the kind of man to be satisfied with making money out of the Southern States. Roscoe's got more go in him than that. Did he tell you?", she added, shooting a glance at her niece, "that he had been to see me before he went?"

Varna looked surprised. "No," she admitted hesitantly. "He—he left in so much haste."

"Stuff and nonsense. He'd been thinking about this a week or more. He came to ask me what I thought about the war, how long it might go on, and what the outcome would be."

"And did you tell him all that?" asked Varna smiling.

Miss Deborah was not amused. "I can't read the future, child," she said, "to that extent. But I told him enough about himself and what I *think* will be the outcome of this dreadful business to make him decide. You'll learn

to be proud of your husband," she added, her face softening as she patted the girl's arm. "If there's anything he can do with his steamboats for our Rebel Government, you see, he'll do it."

It took Varna some time to realize that the change she felt was in herself, not in the life at the Hall. Everything, she found, went on much as before, except there were few supper parties now and all the younger men had gone into the army. Only old folks, grey-bearded old men, friends of her father's, and their garrulous old wives, seemed to be the guests at the house now. Retiring with the menfolk to the library, the Colonel wrought himself into a high pitch of excitement over the war. All of them were too old to offer their services, but to judge from their voices and the number of times Lucullus brought the gentlemen drinks, Varna was certain that they were fighting the war over and over and routing the Yankees time and again behind the library door.

She sighed when she thought of the parties they had had before the war, of the crowds of visitors and the many exciting beaux that had been her chief interest before she was married. Why, even old Reverend Mr. Pollock whose amusing gallantry and roving eye had invariably made her feel slightly embarrassed as if she were not properly dressed, and his quiet ineffectual little wife—Varna thought of Sarah Pollock as a colourless woman whom marriage had drained of all life—would not be coming to stay now as they had gone to live in Macon. "Mrs. Pollock cannot stand the idea of war," the reverend gentleman had written the Colonel, "and for her health I have moved to a comfortable living here." Varna wondered which had weighed more with him, the comfortable living in peaceful Georgia or his wife's fear of war.

Lucy seemed to be taking the war too seriously even to think about beaux. Varna could not understand it. She

found her sister in her room busily collecting all sorts of odds and ends, bits of cotton cloth and table serviettes that would have been thrown away, and she was actually cutting them up and sewing the strips together.

"They're for the poor soldiers," she said, answering Varna's amazed question. "The doctors say they can't get enough lint or bandages for the hospitals. It's terrible to know how those poor, poor men are suffering because they can't get enough medical supplies. Won't you help me sew these up, Varna dear?"

With a bad grace, but chiefly because she wanted to talk to her sister, Varna sat down and began to sort out the stray pieces of cloth and join them together.

"I don't know when Roscoe's coming home," she said after a while. "Don't you think he was mean to go off in such a hurry like that and leave me to come home alone?"

At mention of his name Lucy shot an agonized glance at her sister.

"He's doing his duty by going off to fight for us," she said in a low voice without looking up again.

"Well, he needn't have gone so soon," retorted Varna.

"But Roscoe would place duty above other things."

"La, la!" smiled Varna, thinking of the last words she and her husband had had together. "But it's not as if he said how *long* he's going to be away. I consider it was mean not to tell me he'd be gone several weeks."

"None of us knows how long any of our brave men will be at the war," said Lucy. "We can only watch, and wait, and pray."

"And sew bandages," added Varna viciously. "It reminds me of that evening you and Roscoe climbed on to the stage in that showboat—do you remember, Lucy?—when you helped him bandage a man that had gotten a bullet through his behind?"

"Oh hush, Varna! Some one might hear you."

"Well, I don't care. I feel so mad the way Roscoe just left me flat in that house."

"I think it's a fine gesture," said Lucy in a quiet but determined voice, "to offer his steamboat to our navy and then help to man her himself. Our men are so brave to face the dangers they do in war——"

Varna threw down her sewing. "War, war! My God, doesn't anybody here ever think or talk of anything but this stupid war? Why have we all gotten crazy about the war when it hardly affects us beyond taking all the nicest men away?"

"Varna dear, they don't go because they like it."

"Well, I believe they do! Men do like war. They like wearing uniforms and carrying guns and things, and they just love the fuss we stupid women make of them when they come home. But what earthly good is this war to us, ruining our season, spoiling our parties, upsetting everybody so nobody can think of anything else but this god-dam war——"

"Hush, Varna."

"Well, I mean it. What earthly good are *we* doing here sitting on our behinds till they're right sore sewing up strips of cloth? My God, what fools we women are! Here, I've broken the thread. And what use is it to me to get married to a man who at once runs off to the war?"

"But darling, he saw it was his duty."

"Duty! Really, Lucy, you're as crazy as the rest about this war and duty and bravery and gallant men. Let the gallant men come home and help us silly women enjoy life, I say, instead of letting us sit like two mummies—sewing—sewing—ouch! Oh, I've stuck the needle in my thumb," she complained, sucking the hurt member. "Aunt Mitty! Oh, Aunt Mitty."

"Yaas, Miss Varna?" said the negress when her bulky form filled the doorway.

Varna looked appealingly at her mammy.

"Aunt Mitty, I've run the needle into my thumb."

"My, my, chile, ain't you gotten car'less or sump'n? You lemme have dat thumb. Ah'll sho fix it."

Lucy went on with her sewing while Varna had her thumb bathed and bandaged, occasionally looking over Aunt Mitty's broad shoulder to try to catch her sister's eye. But somehow Lucy was not in a frivolous mood. Something seemed to have changed her these days, Varna reflected, as if she had something on her mind. She wondered whether her sister had a beau and was nursing in secret a breaking heart. But she felt certain that was not it. Lucy seemed to be quite unable to attract even presentable gentlemen nowadays, thought Varna, running her mind over all the possible men in the country. Lucy certainly had changed. Really it was time the silly girl got over the death of that Anson beau of hers and found herself another one. That had happened over two years ago, and here she was nineteen—why, she must be twenty—twenty then, and no beau nor, as far as Varna could see, no hope of one.

"It can't be the war entirely," Varna thought when she was back in her own room. "She just won't let the poor boys come near her. And there must be lots of nice boys who'd give anything to feel they are fighting for one special girl. And there are lots of girls with beaux in the army. Franklyn—" she involuntarily coloured. "If I weren't a most respectable matron and mother, I should have—I mean, Franklyn would probably be my beau." She sighed. She could not stop thinking of Franklyn as her beau, writing to her, telling her all the exciting and dashing things he did on the battlefield, while she lay on her bed and read his letter and sent him little things for his comfort—mittens and socks and what not—and his replies, written within the sound of guns, perhaps even—her heart quickened at the thought—perhaps with the

notepaper marked with a tiny stain of his own blood from a wound, not a dreadful wound but a little wound that just escaped being dreadful and fatal—and his begging for a lock of her lovely hair and her refusal at first and then after another letter—maybe two—her generous kindness cutting off just a teeny wisp behind her ear where it wouldn't show and sending it to him. . . .

Varna looked at herself in the glass above her dressing-table, running her fingers under her hair and lifting it up above her ears. She was wearing it in the latest style that had come from London by way of the salons in New Orleans—frilled above her forehead and gathered in a net at the nape of her neck. With her regular features and bright, vivacious eyes it was a style that suited her. Her eyes travelled down the line of her shoulders to the constricted curve of her breasts beneath the basque, and she pursed her lips at the contours of her waist.

"Never again," she told herself. "It just ruins a girl's figure, and there's no knowing what I'd look like after a second one. I don't care what folks say. I don't believe I was ever born to have children, and if he—if he wants another when he does come home I shall have to go into a decline. I just can't stand it."

And the weeks of waiting while there was no news from him and the newspapers were full of war only made her more fretful.

"Thank goodness," she thought, "*Roscoe* is guarding the river with his old steamboat. So long as he keeps the Yankees out of the river I suppose we shall be let be in peace."

The news that Federal gunboats had rushed the boom defence at the mouth of the river, taken New Orleans by surprise and silenced the Crescent City's feeble batteries, arrived like a bombshell into the Quillon household.

"Oh it can't be!" Varna protested, the back of her

throat dry. "Do you mean there are actually Yankees *in* New Orelans now? It can't be, Papa."

"I'm afraid so, daughter," said the Colonel grimly. "I've dreaded this all along. They should have had more guns in the forts. No gunboat ought to be able to silence a shore battery. The paper says that Admiral Farragut's boats ran past the entire waterfront and the city had no alternative—no alternative, pah!—but to surrender."

"Fo' land's sakes, Papa," exclaimed Varna staring, "then there are Yankee gunboats coming up the river right now!"

"Don't use such language to me, young lady," the Colonel admonished her. "No, it appears the Yankees were prevented from coming farther up the river by our own gunboats which—listen here, my dear—'returned a rapid and gallant running fire while steaming in front of the enemy ships'."

"Papa, were any of our boats sunk?"

"It doesn't mention any casualties, Varna."

"Does it say what gallant part the *Magnolia* played?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear," said the Colonel, his eyes twinkling. "But doubtless she was in the front of the fighting."

"I'm sure she was, Father. Oh, I do hope Roscoe will manage to keep those terrible Yankees away."

It was nearly a week later before Varna had another letter from him and she took it to her room to read it. It was addressed "C.S.N.S. *Magnolia Bloom* at Baton Rouge, La." So he was nearer home, she thought with quick relief.

"My dearest wife," she read. "A great many events have occurred since I was last able to write to you, and by the time this reaches you—I only hope it will be as soon as possible—you will no doubt have learned that New Orleans is in the hands of the Federals. It is a sad blow to us all, for we have not only lost three of our

finest ironclads, but it means that our capital city is gone and the Mississippi bottled up." ("How dear and sweet of him," she thought, "writing 'we' like that as though he belonged to the South as much as any of us.")

"The Federals stole up to the boom defences and burst through under cover of darkness. Our noble ironclad, the *Louisiana*, was lying just inside the mouth of the pass, moored just above Fort Jackson with her guns trained on the river bar. She could not be moved as her engines were under repair and so she was just a floating battery. I am told she drove one of the Federal gunboats back, and set her aground on the bar. But even the *Louisiana* was silenced by the overwhelming Federal fleet that came up the river. We, aboard the *Magnolia*, were lying at anchor five miles up the river almost abreast of Breton Sound with our fires banked. The *Baton Rouge* and *Lafitte*, two of our more heavily armed boats, which were stationed three miles farther down river, opened fire on the Yankees when they appeared. But alas! The *Lafitte* was disabled by a shell and the *Baton Rouge* was forced to steam up river towards us with the enemy ships coming up astern like menacing shapes in the darkness.

"You should just have seen old Captain Hickey dancing up and down the Texas deck, raging at the crew for being so dilatory with the anchor and then rushing into the pilot-house to shout down the speaking-tube for more steam while we waited to get underway! The *Baton Rouge* almost passed us before we had enough steam in our boilers to make up against the current and for a time it looked as though we should be left behind to deal with the Federals singlehanded. Old Hickey danced and shook his fist at the *Baton Rouge*, calling her all sorts of cowardly names for trying to desert us, until we picked up steam and kept abreast of her.

"There seemed to be at least twelve or fourteen of the enemy ships, all heavily armed ironclads, and our own

small guns could make scarcely any effect on them when they came within range. When dawn came we could see that nearly all their ships were screw steamers, and so our hopes of disabling them by firing at their paddleboxes were doomed. Indeed, they were both well armed and well armoured and our shells seemed to have no more effect than to carry away bits of their rigging. So you see, my darling, we should only have cast our own two antiquated steamboats away had we tried to resist the onslaught of the Yankees. There was nothing for us to do except to run before the enemy exchanging a long-range fire and hoping that when we led them up to the two forts just below New Orleans their advance would be arrested and we should be able to manœuvre into a better position. It was a last desperate hope, my dear.

"Imagine our chagrin, therefore, when we saw their ships approach the forts and receive only a dozen or so of shells, many of which I swear had scarcely strength to burst, let alone blow a Yankee gunboat sky-high! The ships' guns were vastly heavier, and we had the mortification of seeing the Federals steaming up past the forts as though they weren't there. And so on right past the waterfront of the city. We heard later that our forts were only half manned, as they have moved a lot of the men up to Tennessee to stop Grant's advance. How dreadful the death of General Johnston was! The men's spirits even aboard the *Magnolia* were shaken at the awful news from Shiloh. News from up the Ohio has been anything but encouraging, and there are times when I fear the worst for our country's—our Southern—hopes. The North has such reserves, so much money, iron, guns and men. And I don't think for one moment now that my own country (dear England!) will come in on 'our' side. But let me not distress you with such croakings, my dear wife. It were better we should try to hope and strive for victory.

"But to return to our running fight opposite New Orleans. When we came abreast of the Custom House, Hickey declared stoutly that he'd sink one of the Yankee ships if he had to ram her, and would have done it too, I do believe, if we had not been ordered to proceed up the river. As it was we edged as close as we dared to the leading Federal vessel, a large-screw corvette, and emptied five or six shells into her. But her shooting was deadly too, and we had shells bursting all about us, in the water, overhead, and two right abaft—that is, behind—the paddleboxes. One has splintered most of the wall of my cabin and ruined some of my precious books! A piece of shrapnel hit our main steam pipe and the engineers were driven out of the engine-room until the valve was turned off at the boilers. One poor man ran screaming to the rail with his face badly scalded, and jumped straight overboard. Alas, we could not possibly stop to pick him up, and the poor fellow must have been drowned. I have a small wound. A piece of shrapnel caught me, but it's nothing much.

"The Federal ships stayed down off New Orleans, silencing the last battery and forcing the unfortunate city to surrender. It was heartbreaking, when Orleans means so much to us all. We were forced to limp up here with several more of our disabled boats, and here we lie, undergoing repairs and alterations. The men are working night and day to put our small flotilla in order again, for the Yankees may steam up the river at any moment. Oh my dear, if they got past us and appeared off Vicksburg I think I should go half crazy worrying about you; although they all say the Yankees could never get past the batteries alive.

"The old *Magnolia* is being fitted with a stout oak and iron-plated ram at last, and there is a rumour—though I can scarce believe it can be so good—that we shall be stationed at Vicksburg as soon as this work is completed.

I very much fear that Farragut's ships will make a great effort to join forces with Grant who seems to be on his way down from the Ohio. Varna, my beloved, I dread what might happen if the enemy succeeds in joining hands on the Mississippi, and so capturing the whole river.

"Do write to me here. There may be time for me to receive a letter, and it is so long since I had the fragrance of one of your beautiful letters, so long since I looked upon your dear face, I can scarcely wait till I hear again from you! And my little Tessa. How I long to hold her in my hands again."

Varna read carefully to the end with a beating heart. In her imagination she pictured the fight, the swiftly moving ships, the deadly fire of the Yankees, the explosion of the bursting shells, and—"I have a small wound. A piece of shrapnel. . . ." The words stood out in her mind and her throat felt dry. "It's nothing much," he had added. How like him! He didn't even say where he was wounded, nor how serious it was. She pictured him struck, falling to the deck, gasping for water in the midst of the battle, and all he told her was that he had a small wound and "it's nothing much". But if he kept the full knowledge from her, hoping to save her anxiety, she felt proud of him, proud that he should have been in the midst of the battle, proud too of the calm way he described it all. And then his wound: she wondered desperately how serious it really was. Why, oh why, hadn't he told her? Supposing, a panic gripped her like a chill wind, just supposing he had been terribly injured, blinded perhaps. *Would* she be capable of nursing him, bringing him back to life, comforting him when he needed it? She knew Lucy would. Lucy was an ideal nurse, she was so quiet and gentle and thoughtful, while she, Varna, could not conjure up the patience required to nurse sick people for long; she got tired of them when they lay for long,

half dead and unable to speak to her. Thank goodness, she thought, he was not seriously wounded.

The second winter of the war clung to the sodden earth as though loth to give way to spring. When the snows had melted in the far north and the young shoots blessed the countryside with their greenness, the swollen Mississippi, subsided like a monster whose belly had covered the valley with a yellow slime. The floods went down leaving in their trail the fetid silt as a curse on the land. In the sinister region of the bottom lands the wonder of spring, the promise of new life, lifted its head in tiny blades of grass and flowers, each day a little more. Above the alluvial slime, yellow as the face of a loathly celestial, the green stems forced their way, thriving in the richness, and soon the valley was green again, green with the joy of spring, the promise of summer. Men moved again upon the roads, upon the plank roads mules slithered and stumbled, wheels creaked and shook and the half-sawn logs lifted and sank muddily beneath their weight. Commerce once more crept along the tortuous roads and planters drove home from the city with news of the war, news that oppressed the Confederacy and brought men home with lips set grim and an anxious look in their eyes.

On the great river there was an unwonted stillness. The ghosts of the great steamboats whose wheels had threshed the yellow monster into angry foam plied still the river in their hundreds with the first freights of the season. But they were only ghosts. Not a single whistle call droned its deep notes across the waters, no longer was the landing agog with wide-eyed negroes, no more the lounging po' whites chewed and spat and watched the steamboats come and go. "Steamboat comin'!" no longer rose as an eager cry at small-town landings, rousing the sleepy folks from their siesta lethargy. The river

was empty as the Arctic Ocean, the landing-stage as silent as a dead city. No steamboats now, proudly flaunting their house flags and pennants, stirring the heart with their melodious whistles; no mammoths of the river, booming great bells in their impatience to be gone; no lofty vessels, ablaze like faery palaces, with row upon row of twinkling lights, swept round the bend past the Chichasaw Bluffs. The great days of the great steamboats were over, their bones lay rotting in the silt of the river. The war, the hot-headed fury of brother for brother, the hatred that rose from the South's cry for freedom, this madness that blazed through the land like a challenge, now lay on the valley like a shadow of evil.

No boats on the river, the landings lay rotting, while Orleans, the mouthpiece for Confederate trade, lay stunned and rebellious beneath the heel of "Beast" Butler, the hated tyrant who had issued a decree that if any fine lady of New Orlans family, no matter how gracious or high-born and proud, should deign to reveal her distaste for oppressors, no matter how distasteful the Yankees may be, she should be treated and branded as one whose life mission was to minister widely to the needs of such soldiers. "These fine Rebels", said he, if report did not lie, "shall be taught a fine lesson they'll never forget. They'll just learn that respect must be paid to Old Glory, and her soldiers are not 'Yankee scum' but brave men, whose lives have been taken to uphold the Union. These proud Rebel women shall have cause to remember."

Like a smear on the tense, smiling face of the South, like a whip-lash across the proud face of her womenfolk, went that edict of shame whose foul implication arose in the feverish brain of "Beast" Butler. It lighted a trail of horror and hatred that blazed far and wide, till the men of the South roared in anger that womenfolk reared in gentleness, kindness, humanity, should be subjected to such coarse jesting brutality that placed any lady who

frowned at a Yankee, or drew her skirts to her when jostled by soldiers, in such a position of callous indignity.

But that was not all that brought sorrow that winter. From the North came the cruellest whip-lash of any, the decree that endangered man's friendship to man, and incensed any burr-headed, hot-tempered rascal to rise and strike down his own master. At Lincoln's behest from the door of the White House the edict had gone forth that all men were free; and the Emancipation of Slaves—the end of all slavery as the abolitionists planned it—was the foolish wrong done to the negroes that winter. To the many it made not the slightest difference, they were part of the family and wanted no change; they were loyal to their masters, they loved their mistresses, their own children played happily with the white children of the Big House; they worked and they served their masters' family, caring and guiding and pleasing the white folks, because in their hearts they bore them no enmity, harboured no malice but love and affection. To these the emancipation meant nothing at all, just another wild joke of "dat white debbil Linkum". But to restless young bucks and wild-headed niggers whose visions of freedom spelled no work or toil, just "settin' aroun' lazy an' singin' an' laffin'", this edict seemed heaven-sent answer to prayer. They were free, free like the white man, free as their boss and his mistis and chillun; the niggers were free now to go to the Promised Land, free to go here, there and roam at will. They, with their shouts and their singing of glory, their soft-padding feet as they went by at night, swarmed north in black companies, singing and dancing, or silent and wondering, looking for Jordan. From plantations and sawmills and houses and cabins, from all manner of shacks and hovels and huts, these simple black people mesmerized by promises that even the Yankees then knew were fantastic, trekked north in their hundreds with their hearts singing "Freedom" and

all that they thought this new freedom would mean. And if hundreds discovered this freedom meant hunger, and misery, and hatred, savage dogs and hostility; if hundreds, bewildered, were put to hard labour, road making, stone breaking, toiling incessantly for hard-hearted Yankees who had found here cheap labour and drove their black bodies as never before, who was to blame if the unhappy negroes found freedom a word for "Starvation or Work", and while toiling for scantier food for their bellies, now thought of the kindness Ole Massa had shown them, now yearned for the slavery of plantation days?

At Lorrimer Hall the cotton was rotting, the fields were laid waste like a land of destruction; when the last crop was laid by and the bales all packed ready, no boats came to take them away from the landing, no steamboats dared face the fleet off New Orleans. No ocean-going ships could leave for Old England to feed the silent Lancashire looms, nor bring work to starving Liverpool families. The cotton, their bread, lay unwanted, a glut, a loss to the planter, a useless commodity, and all the plantations throughout Mississippi were stagnant and ruined by the loss of their trade. Slowly and surely the Federal talons were closing their grip on the throat of the South; by little and little they strangled the river, blockading all ports from Chesapeake to the Gulf.

All winter there had been activity in the forts against the Chickasaw Bluffs, earthworks and cannon had grown upon the heights like iron foliage. General Pemberton, in charge of the defences and forces, had seen the need to make Vicksburg impregnable, for Vicksburg lay now the last Confederate stronghold between the jaws of the enemy. From ruined New Orleans the dreaded Farragut, late in the summer, had steamed up the Mississippi and run past the forts that guarded Vicksburg, exchanging volley for volley and shell for shell, yet passing those

batteries and returning down river, flaunting at his jack-staffs the stars and stripes. The Yankee ironclads had shown the weakness of the city's defences, how inadequate were the batteries for stopping enemy's ships from running past the riverside town; and the fear that Yankees might come back again in force, with more ships and more men and more guns and more might, and join hands with the Federals advancing down from the North, gripped men's imagination in Vicksburg and set them feverishly to work, increasing the gun power and improving their aim. No longer should it be possible for Federal ironclads to steam past their forts, trusting to the Rebs' far and wide shooting of old-fashioned guns. Vicksburg, last stronghold on the Mississippi, must be made impregnable.

Before the levee near the disused Old Landing a handful of steamboats lay waiting for action. These boats, a pathetic reminder of glories that were gone from the river, the broad Mississippi, were all that the Rebels could muster for Vicksburg, the only fleet left for defence of their city. Just six decrepit and leaky old steamboats, damaged and war-scarred and rusty and feeble: a stern-wheeler, whose engines, when pressed hard, would clatter and wheeze and perhaps make a speed of six knots; four of the others just motley sidewheelers, changed from their peaceful vocation to warships by having their sides shell-protected with sheet-iron and mounting above them the lightest of guns. The sixth bore more promise with iron-plated armour, and her bow was prolonged in the form of a ram: with her two guns protected with heaped bales of cotton and her gun crew alert for the Yankees' approach, she looked, as she was by those desperate standards, a formidable unit for gunboats to meet. Her captain, Old Hickey, for all his loud blustering and mirth and hard drinking and back-slapping jokes, was nevertheless anxious "to have a good whack at 'em", crazy to set

his beloved *Magnolia* straight at the enemy, ram her and sink her. And Roscoe was anxious, as crazy as Hickey, to have their old steamboat encounter the Yanks, for these months of preparation and waiting expectantly had used up his patience and peaceful desires. The time he had spent with Varna at Oakwood, when his naval duties allowed him at home, had been difficult, lacking in something indefinite, not unhappy, but missing just something or other; some tenderness, passion or welcoming smile; he could think of no way that could alter his wife, making her love him as man could desire. "Ah well, she's just cold," was all he could say, and let the business of war fill the ache in his heart.

To the north of the city, like a plague advancing, the blue coats had come from the Ohio and Cumberland, sacking Memphis and Greenville and Shiloh, steadily forcing their way down the river till they paused, like hounds growling around a quarry, at the bend in the river above De Soto and Vicksburg. Like a suspicion that grows daily to fear and to terror, like the first signs of storm that rumble on the horizon, stretch forth their black fingers till they hide the heavens and burst with the heart-stopping anger of thunder upon the expectant countryside, so the name of Grant, the dreaded Major-General of the Federal forces, grew with the rumblings of war down the Mississippi Valley. Grant was the name that had spelled the surrender of those forts on the Cumberland, those Confederate batteries on the Tennessee; Grant was the man who had captured Island Number 10; and Grant was now working at the very door of Vicksburg as a mole burrows to reach his objective.

Across the isthmus that lay below Vicksburg, just out of reach of the guns of the forts, Grant's men were at work again digging a canal. Cutting off the tongue of

land where stood De Soto, severing the rusty little railroad to Shreveport, Grant's canal would cut off the horseshoe in which the proud river swept past the bluffs and allow his gunboats and men and horses to pass safely to the south of the city, and place him and his men on the one side of Vicksburg from which he well knew the town might be taken. Once he could join forces with Farragut's fleet below Vicksburg the capture of the city, the last Rebel stronghold on the length of the Mississippi, would be but a matter of waiting and time. And then would the Confederacy be severed in twain.

And impotent to stop the advance of the Yankees, the Confederates waited behind their guns, knowing full well that all the time the blue coats were digging and digging and digging, opening a short cut below the fair city that would bring them suddenly on their unprotected flank. No wonder that Pemberton, foreseeing the danger, urged his captains and men to build up defences, to add earthworks and forts to the low-lying swamp that was all that protected the city on the south side.

At the last hour when the canal was nearly completed, when the steamboats and horses and men and provisions almost waited for the order to rush through the new cut, the river—Old Man Mississippi—played one of his unexpected tricks. It seemed as though the hand of Providence had taken a turn to save the city from the Federal attack. Perhaps it was that far up in Nebraska spring had come late and the snows were still melting; or perhaps the rain fell in torrents in Illinois, flooding the fields and swelling the river. Whatever the cause Old Man River was swollen, and during the night he welled up his banks. With a gurgle and a roar, like an old man's hard laughter, he burst through the levee that protected the land, and soon there was nothing to show for the labour of digging but tumultuous yellow flood water. In the morning the Federal engineers gathered to survey the work that had

taken them weeks; some swore, some smiled, some just shrugged their shoulders; none could do more than curse Mississippi, curse the Old Man for his dastardly trick, while they looked on in vain at the muddy flood water that covered Grant's canal and their hopes of the winter.

The Confederates rejoiced. "Old Mississippi's done our work for us," they said, "Old Man River's drowned out the Yanks' camp!" But if they expected that would stop General Grant in his advance on their city, then they reckoned without the man, Ulysses Grant.

"It's too bad the canal's gotten flooded like that," he told his engineers when they reported. "I guess then there's one thing left for us to do: Put our men aboard the steamboats and run past those Rebel batteries under cover of darkness. We must take them by surprise."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE *Magnolia Bloom* swung out into the current with a full head of steam. Without a light showing and with the glare from her fire doors screened from the night she crept away from the landing and took up her position in the middle of the river.

The night was so black that even the outline of the bluffs beyond the town was invisible from her decks, and the line of trees on the De Soto shore was but a smudge in the darkness. It was eerie out there in the silence of the river, waiting for an enemy that would loom out of the night at any moment, and it seemed to Roscoe to become more eerie when the first pin-points of light pricked the darkness as fires were started on both sides of the river.

"There you are, Torrence, they're coming," remarked Captain Hickman waving the glowing stub of his cigar in the direction of the flares. "Those Yanks'll get the surprise of their lives. Goshdarn my pants if this river ain't a goin' to be as light as day soon. Look at those bonfires our boys've lit right now."

"They're more than bonfires," Roscoe said thoughtfully, peering through the pilot-house windows. "They look like houses burning to me."

"Yeah, they're houses all right," came Sam Truckee's voice from the darkness. Against the red glow of the fires Roscoe could now distinguish the figure of the pilot braced against the spokes of the wheel. "I'll say our boys are burning some of the old places up to'ards the Yazoo there. It sure lights up the river, but by heck that fire

on the right there looks like your woodyard goin' up."

"Or Colonel Quillon's house," suggested the Captain.

Roscoe stared. There certainly was a tremendous blaze now way up river towards the mouth of the Yazoo and it looked to him very much like the exact spot where Lorrimer Hall stood. He could not think of any other buildings in that direction that would give off so much light, but from that distance at night it was difficult to say exactly where anything was, and he could not imagine Confederate soldiers setting fire to their own people's houses, even if they did want to light up the Yankees' stealthy approach.

"If the damn fools have set fire to the woodyard at Lorrimer," he said testily, "the Government'll have to make full compensation."

"Compensation!" Old Hickey broke into his high-pitched laugh. "You'll be mighty lucky to get a dollar out of Jeff Davis. I guess he ain't gotten one to spare right now."

"Maybe," suggested Truckee chewing his cigar, "maybe it's the Yanks that have set off those fires by the Yazoo Creek. That looks like another one way over there around Milliken's Bend. Our folks wouldn't want to light up the river around there."

Roscoe's jaw set. By God, he thought when the full significance of the pilot's reasoning burst on him, if those Yanks were setting fire to all the places on their way, then it *might* be the Hall that was burning, to say nothing of the woodyard. He strained his eyes at the distant glare, trying to locate it in the surrounding darkness, trying to assure himself that it was too much to the right, too far north, or west, to be either the Hall or the lumber. But if Yankees had surrounded the Hall, had set fire to it, he tried not to imagine what would happen to the Colonel and Miss Deborah and Lucy. He wished now he had insisted on Lucy coming to stop with Varna at Oakwood

with the Yankees so close. It was just like the brave girl to insist that she should stay at home because the war had affected her father so much he needed some one more than Aunt Debby or old Aunt Mitty to see after him.

"Here they come," exclaimed the Captain suddenly. "By God, sir, there's the first of those goddamyanks coming around the bend."

"I can see her," muttered Truckee shortly, "I bin watchin' her chimneys above them trees the last five minutes. I see the soot catch and flare up in one of 'em a mile back there."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"Because I'm the pilot," replied Truckee with heavy sarcasm, "and it's my job to steer this yer old armour-plated crate where you want her, not to announce the arrival of our guests."

The three men fell silent while the *Magnolia*, with engines stopped, lay quiet drifting on the current like an Indian brave waiting in ambush for his quarry. The fires were blazing merrily on both sides of the bend now and the river beyond the bluffs was clearly lit up by their crimson glow. The Confederate spies had done their work well. Far from rushing his transports past the forts under the hoped-for cover of darkness and taking the Rebels by surprise, the Confederates had known Admiral Porter's intentions long in advance. Through the messages received daily from his spies in Grant's camp General Pemberton had learned of the intended attack. He knew the number of steamboats Grant had for the expedition—seven in all—but learnt how each was to be protected by railroad iron and bales of cotton placed along the upperworks on her larboard side, and how, to protect her paddlewheel on the same side, which would be subjected to the batteries' shell-fire each boat was to have a coal barge lashed alongside. He knew, too, that at the

suggestion of one of Grant's engineers, the exhaust steam from the 'scape pipes was to be turned into the cabins and passageways instead of up the chimneys so that the regular gasping of the engines would not betray their presence across the water. What effect the live steam was to have on the unhappy soldiers who would be packed below decks, no one could tell. Grant was evidently making a last desperate effort to move his army to the south side of the Rebel stronghold, and if Admiral Porter was willing to make the attempt his men must put up with the discomforts.

Amongst the important military information that had daily filtered down to Vicksburg in the ways known to spies, other items of news had been passed on to become titbits of gossip at the dinner tables of society, and the ladies of Vicksburg were happy to regale each other with stories of the Yankee generals.

"What *do* you think? That dreadful man, Grant, my dear, dropped his teeth. Why yes false teeth, of course. Actually *dropped* his false teeth in the canal he was digging. Well, his men were digging, then; but you know, my dear, how democratic the Yankees are, and maybe even a major or general or whatever he is, might take to the spade, otherwise how *could* he drop his teeth in the mud? I ask you. And they say—dear Captain Lovell told me. He said he had heard it right from General Pemberton himself—they say Grant has telegraphed for his dentist to come at once and fix him some new teeth. Can you *imagine* that? His own dentist from his home town, Galena, I think Captain Lovell said, somewhere up in Illinois. How can a general win a battle without any teeth? Isn't it too absurd?"

While during the past weeks the menace from the North had drawn ever closer above the city, and the distant thunder of the Yankee guns had crept ever nearer up the Mississippi, there seemed to be little else ladies

could do in the town but knit and crochet and make bandages for the army, and exchange the latest gossip from the fighting lines.

"I can see another boat coming around the bend," cried Old Hickey excitedly. "Blame me if we ain't goin' to give those Yanks the surprise of their lives. You see when we set the old *Magnolia* at 'em."

"If we can get her to point in the right direction," Truckee remarked casually as he set some bells jingling in the engine-room.

"What d'you mean, point in the right direction?"

Roscoe heard the pilot expectorate with unconscious deadly aim at the brass cuspidor in the corner. He never missed.

"With that ram on her bow," Truckee explained, "this old crate steers like a house adrift. Look how she's slewed athwart the channel now, like a goddam cow that wants milking."

Captain Hickman reached the pilot's side in three quick steps.

"Don't you talk that way about this steamboat," he exclaimed testily. "If you reckon you can't steer her then by God, sir, get away from the wheel and I'll show you. We got to sink every goddam one of those Yankee boats that gets past the batteries or by heck I'll give up steam-boatin' for ever."

"Take it easy, Cap'n. Take it easy," breathed Truckee, grinning in the darkness. "I only figured we need the engines as well as the rudder to manœuvre with that ram stuck on our bow."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" The Captain chewed his cigar for a moment, then tossed it out of the window. "When we ram," he added more calmly, "we'll go in on their starboard side—that's the side they won't have the coal barge."

With her paddlewheels now turning slowly the *Mag-*

nolia headed up river against the current, still invisible in the darkness below the city as Truckee edged her a little towards the Louisiana shore. From around the bend the Federal steamboats had come into view, silhouetted now in the glow of the fires on shore, all seven of them looking lopsided with their coal barges bulging like panniers on their port sides. The Federals may not have bargained to have their stealthy approach lighted with Rebel fires, but they showed no sign of having been taken by surprise. On they came, their smokestacks belching smoke and sparks like fiery monsters from the nether regions, while the *Magnolia* quietly approached them from the gloom below the burning houses.

Suddenly a red flash spurted from the battery on the hill and a shell burst over the leading steamboat. The two explosions seemed to rend the air almost together. Then other flashes marked the forts and the air became vibrant with the scream of shells.

"If they all go and blow those goddam Yankee boats out of the water", wailed Captain Hickman, almost dancing with excitement, "there won't be one left for us to ram!"

"Don't you worry," Roscoe said grimly, "our guns haven't made a hit yet. And, my God, look! Those first two are gunboats."

As he spoke the two leading Federal boats opened fire with guns whose deep roar told of a heavy calibre. The path of their shells could be traced in a crimson curve against the sky, and when they burst over the eastern fort the flashes lit up the walls and the black muzzles of the Rebel guns with photographic clearness.

The forts fired again, sending their shells crashing into the water around the leading gunboat, and the Yankees replied with their guns well elevated, throwing their shells high up into the midst of the batteries.

"Those blasted Yanks sure can shoot," remarked Truckee grudgingly.

"You're right," admitted Roscoe with a wry smile. "We learned that ourselves in England when Paul Jones met our men-o'-war in the North Sea."

"Huh?"

"Oh that was eighty years back. Time of the Revolution. Forgotten history so far as English history books are concerned."

"Shucks, Torrence," cried the Captain, as he clapped his hand on Roscoe's shoulder, "they *can't* shoot I tell you. That first lot of shells was just sheer luck. Edge her over a bit more to larboard, pilot. By God, we'll stop them damyankees if we have to board 'em in the good old way!"

The night reverberated with the thunder of the guns and bursting shells, and as the two leading steamboats came nearer so the other vessels in the convoy came one after the other into range and the batteries began to train their fire on to them. As none of the other boats replied to the Confederate shells it was clear that only the first two vessels were ironclads, and the others but transports, and one of the batteries in particular concentrated their fire on the leading vessel.

"By God she's hit!" Captain Hickman leaped with joy. "Just look there now, right abaft the pilot-house."

A shell had burst on the advancing gunboat about amidships and for an instant her pilot-house with the tall chimney on either side of it was silhouetted against the red flash. But it seemed to make no difference to her; she came on with her guns booming their defiance at regular intervals.

"She'll soon be in range of our own guns," said the Captain. "Your gun-crew all set, Torrence?"

"Just itching to pull the cord," Roscoe replied with a queer feeling of excitement growing within him.

"Then tell 'em to let those Yanks have it."

Roscoe left the pilot-house grinning. There was some-

thing stimulating in Old Hickey's excitement on occasions like this, and he intended to stop around the Texas as soon as his guns had gone into action. But it was disconcerting to see how all the heavy shells from Vicksburg batteries had failed so far to stop any of the Federal boats from running past them. The Rebel shells were scoring hits and the packed cotton bales on one of the transports had caught fire, but still the seven black shapes came steadily on through the rain of iron, as though hell itself would not stop them.

The leading boat was nearly past the lower battery now and not half a mile from the Confederate ram. Almost simultaneously the *Magnolia*'s two guns spoke, shaking the old steamboat as though she had struck a sandbar. Roscoe had the satisfaction of seeing one of the shells burst right over the enemy boat's bow, while the other threw up a fountain a few yards ahead of her where it plunged into the river.

"That was a good start," he said to himself. "A little more to the left and we'll have her."

It seemed as though the Yankees had sighted the *Magnolia* for the first time. The gunboat began to alter course, slewing around slowly with the coal barge hanging clumsily to her side, until she was almost bows on to the *Magnolia*. The latter's guns spoke again and this time one of the shells burst against the gunboat's iron plating.

Sam Truckee jangled the "Full speed ahead" bells and leant over the speaking-tube. "Give her all you've got, Mac," he said, "we'll need it."

"Come on, now, Torrence," Captain Hickman shouted from the pilot-house door; "blow their boilers sky-high!"

Roscoe paid no attention. The gun crew knew their job too well to waste shells on the ironclad's armour surrounding her boilers and engines. They were aiming for the more vulnerable spots, the hull at the waterline,

the pilot-house, or the main steam pipe. And their aim was getting better.

Suddenly a crash shook the *Magnolia* from stem to stern and a jet of water sprang up alongside, drenching the Texas deck.

"Godalmighty!" cried the Captain. "The bastards are firing at us now!"

Wet through from the spray Roscoe came into the pilot-house, shaking his coat. As he did so another shell exploded at the base of the starboard chimney, blowing in the windows with a shattering of glass. As the smoke cleared away he saw the great iron pipe sway and totter, and before he could yell a warning the chimney came crashing down on the deck a few feet from the corner of their wheelhouse.

"God damn those bastards!" exclaimed the Captain as the sparks from the gaping flue floated up past the vacant windows. "I'll learn 'em to knock my old *Magnolia* about. Mister," he added turning to Roscoe, "we'll edge up closer and fill her full of shrapnel."

The two steamboats were less than a quarter of a mile apart now, the Federal gunboat coming down stream slowly with her unwieldy coal barge clinging to her side. Some of her guns were spitting fire up at the batteries and the bowchasers at the *Magnolia*, while the latter was booming up stream straight at her with her paddlewheels racing and a shower of sparks gushing from the hole in her deck where her starboard chimney had stood. Through the smoke Roscoe could see the Yankee ships against the glow of the land fires coming down in a single line ahead like any orderly battle squadron, and although the Rebel batteries were hurling shells at them as fast as the guns could be loaded, not one of the Federal boats had broken line yet.

The *Magnolia's* guns continued to fire, sending their shells crashing against the oncoming ironclad. But

Admiral Porter's vanguard was a fully armoured steamer and the small shells of the *Magnolia*'s guns seemed to have no effect on her. The black bulk of her hull was rapidly coming closer.

"Keep her away a bit more," Captain Hickman shouted above the din, "edge her over to larboard so's we can turn her in as she comes past and——"

The words were driven back into his mouth. With a deafening crash the side of the pilot-house fell in as a shell passed clean through the structure and burst fifty feet the other side of the ship.

"Blast their hides," exclaimed the old man when he found his breath. "Are you still there, Torrence?"

"Yes, I'm here," said Roscoe grimly. "Near one, wasn't it?"

"My God, where's Sam?" The Captain groped in the darkness. Truckee was no longer at the wheel and he instinctively grasped the spokes.

"He's here," said Roscoe after a pause, "on the floor. I guess he's . . ." His hand was wet with blood where he had touched the pilot and his silence told the truth.

The Captain half turned his head.

"Give the order to stand by," he said sharply, all trace of excitement suddenly gone from his voice. "We're going to ram her."

The gunboat was close on the *Magnolia*'s starboard bow now and for a moment it seemed as though the two vessels paused, each watching the other like two snarling dogs asking for a scrap. The Yankee's forward gun flashed once more and the same instant, so short was the range, the shell crashed through the Confederate ram's iron plating. The explosion in her vitals lifted the deck and sent Roscoe reeling against the wrecked pilot-house door while the old vessel shook from end to end.

Immediately there was a muffled roaring sound and a cloud of hot steam enveloped him in a choking fog.

Below he could hear the screams of men, unbelievably shrill and unearthly as black figures stumbled up from the boiler deck pressing blistered hands to scalded faces.

"They've hit our main steam pipe," he gasped as he felt the door for support. "We can't keep her going now."

His gaze was transfixed on the moving mass ahead. The *Magnolia* had turned and was heading straight at the Federal boat's starboard bow with less than a biscuit toss separating the two vessels. With her wheels slowing down as the last of her steam roared away through her shattered woodwork, the gallant *Magnolia* still carried her way through the water towards the gunboat; at her wheel, silent and yet defiant, Captain Hickman clung to the spokes in a desperate effort to hold his crippled steamboat to her course, while the splinter that had gouged its way into his chest seemed to burn into his very heart. Isaiah Hickman, the whimsical captain whose jokes and gallantry had delighted many a lady passenger before the war, Old Hickey, the clowning, excitable, good-natured friend of the riverside, knew that he had run his course. Breathing heavily between his teeth he grasped the kicking wheel and fixed his whole attention on the dark shape of the Yankee gunboat.

In the dim red light Roscoe could see the blue coats swarming away from the gunboat's sides, could discern the pale blobs of their faces as they pressed their fellows back, away from the advancing ram, could even hear their shouts as they milled and swept back towards the other side.

Then the two vessels struck. With a rasping, splintering sound the *Magnolia*'s iron ram tore into the wooden hull of the other boat below the waterline, biting into her side like a hot knife into butter. Shuddering from end to end, the *Magnolia* dipped her bow under the weight of the ironclad with her nose buried deep, while a fountain of water spouted up between them, clattering on the decks.

Under the impact the gunboat heeled over while the cruel ram tore farther and farther at her soft-wood planking as she heeled, and her starboard paddlewheel lifted clear of the water, racing wildly with the floats barely clipping the foam between the hulls.

Captain Hickman staggered at the now useless wheel, hanging on to the upper spokes.

"By God, that's larned them goshdarn Yanks not to fire at my *Magnolia*," he gasped. "That's settled their account." He turned eyeing Roscoe in the darkness. "You better get going," he added, breathing heavily; "the old lady's got her ram fast in that Yank's side and she'll go down with her." He tottered away from the wheel and Roscoe caught him with sudden despair. He could hear the bos'un ordering out the yawl, the ship's boat.

"Are you hurt, Hickey?" he asked anxiously, taking the old man's weight in his arms and edging him towards the wrecked settee.

"Not much, Roscoe," lied the captain as he slumped on to the seat. "I guess those bastards got me with that last shot of theirs."

"I'll help you into the yawl," urged Roscoe. "The old ship's going fast."

Already, as the Yankee gunboat settled deeper the *Magnolia* was listing towards her enemy, drawn down by the crippled ironclad.

"No. No, Roscoe." Captain Hickman began to cough and Roscoe was horrified to find the old man's chest covered with blood. "I reckon my day is done, like the old *Magnolia's*." He held Roscoe's arm for a moment. "I don't reckon I'll leave her now."

"You just can't imagine what else they did," Lucy cried brokenly. "Oh it was too horrible, Varna. I was simply distracted. The soldiers were all over everywhere. They trampled all over the garden pulling up our flowers and

my lovely gardenias were simply ruined, every one of them. And they pulled up *everything* in the vegetable garden so there wasn't anything left for the negroes. And they went into the poor folks' cabins and told them they were free and they'd better go. Half our people just didn't know what to do. They just stood there outside their cabins smiling at the soldiers and looking at each other, and when I ran out to plead with the Yankees to stop destroying everything, old Hebron and Tom, and oh, ever so many others ran up to me and said, 'Please, Miss Lucy, what's we got a do?' " Unconsciously Lucy lapsed into the negro intonation. " 'Dese yer soljers tells us we gotta go. We doan' wanna go, Miss Lucy. What's we got a go fo?' The poor dears were driven crazy by the soldiers. But a lot of the field-hands went crazy and started in to steal everything they could lay hands on. They even came into the house—into the entrance hall, darling, imagine that!—and began to look around for things to take. But I was so furious I took Papa's riding whip down from the wall and threatened them with it. That tall nigger Trick was the ringleader; you know I've always hated him. He looks so evil. And when he saw I intended giving him a thrashing he backed out and, thanks be to God, Varna, they all left the house. And I could hear them laughing and whooping and running all over the place outside, and then some of the Yankee soldiers came in and when they saw me standing there with the whip still in my hand—I was breathless with the fright the niggers had given me—they laughed and one of them who was in an officer's uniform said, 'Oh—oh, a little nigger beater, huh? You can't do that now, missie.' He spoke in a horrid nasal voice, much worse than poor dear Cousin Stella's. And he actually caught the whip and *tore* it from my hands. I was so furious I smacked his face."

Lucy's eyes flashed at the recollection and, watching

her, Varna was intrigued to think of her sister's behaving like a spitfire. She wondered what she might have done had she been there.

"It made the others laugh," Lucy continued, "but I could see the officer was angry. He threw the whip away and said, 'That won't help you any, miss, nor your father either.' And then I nearly cried, for I was terrified what the soldiers were going to do and I told the officer that if he was a gentleman he would order his men off the plantation and stop them 'from stealing things. I could hear shots being fired outside and for one awful moment I imagined they might be shooting Papa. But the officer behaved better after that and told his men not to harm any one, although he said they would have to take Papa prisoner because he was an army colonel. I got panic-stricken then and begged the officer not to take Papa away, and explained how he had only been in the army *before* the war and fought for the Federal Government, and indeed he was too old to fight in this awful war. So they said they'd have to lock Papa up, because he was a man and had been a soldier, anyway, and would you believe it, they locked him in the library and *took the key with them!*"

The colour was returning to Lucy's cheeks as she talked and her eyes shone with indignation.

"I tried the library door with all my might," she went on, "and banged on it, but poor Papa inside said not to make a fuss, the Yankees would go away soon, but go and comfort Auntie Deborah. He was very calm and said we could do nothing. My, but I was beside myself with rage! If they hadn't shut him up they said, Papa would have shot them. Oh I wish he had. I would if I had had a pistol. I ran into all the rooms in the house and it was terrible what those beasts had done. Oh, my dear, I can't tell you. The curtains in all the rooms were ruined, they had cut up the carpets, stolen all the sheets and linen and

all the silver Aunt Debby hadn't hidden under the smoke-house floor. And when I ran into my room to try to save my silver dressing-table set I found a soldier in there, actually pulling my dresses out of the cupboard! When he saw me he—he—oh I can't tell you." Lucy hid her face against her sister's arm.

Varna appeared both indignant and intrigued. "Darling, did he try to get your dress off?"

Lucy looked as if Varna had struck her.

"Oh Varna, no! How *could* you?" she exclaimed, lifting her head and regarding her sister with round eyes. "But I—I thought he was going to *kiss* me at first; he stood near the door and smiled and said, 'Wall ef you ain't the purtiest gal I seen this year!' Oh such a common man, Varna, although he was quite young—only a boy. But I screamed and fled downstairs."

"Pity, if he *was* young and good-looking," said Varna with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Oh Varna, really, you're for ever joking about horrible things." Lucy looked distressed. "After a time," she continued, "the Yankees left us—poor Papa and Aunt Deborah and myself—and we heard them shooting all our hogs and chickens in the yard, our cows, and they rode off the horses, and Varna darling, I could have cried when I saw that horrid mulatto Jake riding off dear Medusa!"

"Jake took my own mare!" Varna flashed at her as Lucy paused for breath. "What else did they do?"

"It was almost comical," Lucy said, her face at last breaking into a faint smile, "to see Aunt Mitty. When some of the soldiers began pulling up the vegetables in her own patch she ran out to them with a pastry roller in her hand! And my dear, the things she *said!* My ears positively burned to hear her. And those horrid men only laughed at her and called her a fat old nigger baboon and told her to go get her hair straightened. One of them

knocked the rolling pin out of her hand, and as she stooped to pick it up again another actually lifted her skirts—and you know Aunt Mitty never wears anything but—well, he gave her a tremendous whack on her—on her—”

“Bottom.”

“Oh Varna! And another of them brutally pushed her over with his foot, and there was poor Aunt Mitty rolling on the ground kicking and screaming with her skirts all over her—oh, it was dreadful—and those brutes simply laughed at her and ran off as soon as she got up. Poor Aunt Mitty. And do you know, Varna, I declare, some of those men couldn’t speak a *word* of English! They were talking in some language I’ve never heard before, although they wore dirty Yankee uniforms.”

“They must be some of the scum of Europe that Lincoln’s brought to America to fight us,” said Varna bitterly. “That’s what makes Roscoe so mad. He says America’s selling her soul to preserve the Union, whatever he means by that.”

“I’m sure he’s right,” agreed Lucy hurriedly. “I can’t believe real native Americans, even if they were only Yankees, would behave so to innocent people.”

“But didn’t you say”, Varna prompted her, “they set fire to the place?”

“Oh yes. It’s all burnt down.” Lucy gave her sister an agonized look. “You see, when the officers ordered the soldiers off we thought we were safe, and Lucullus released Papa from the library and we were all—Auntie Debby and Papa and Aunt Mitty and I—were congratulating ourselves on our good fortune and trying to decide how we should repair all the damage, when just as it was getting dark the soldiers came back with more of their kind, and my dear, they had all been at the liquor, but where they had gotten it I don’t know. I was terrified at sight of them, but so thankful that you weren’t there to

endure such indignities. They insisted on taking poor dear Papa away. Oh I cried and pleaded with them, but they wouldn't listen. Poor Father was beside himself with anger and threatened to shoot anybody who touched him or any one of us, but they overcame him and took his pistol away—the trigger had jammed or something—and marched him off. Oh Varna, I was crazy with fright, wondering what they were going to do. And it was ~~hours~~ before he came back, limping worse than ever, for the soldiers had hurt his bad leg again, and by then they had set fire to the house and the negro cabins and smoke-house and everything, and it was quite dark."

Lucy paused collecting her breath.

"I can't tell you what it felt like watching our dear house burning, and I thought of all our things in there—we had saved so very little. The Yankees stayed until the whole house was all alright and then they went; but I was so frightened they would come back for Papa I clung to him and I do believe I'd have torn the eyes out of any man who had tried to take Papa away from me then!"

She sat up, her eyes wide with excitement.

"And then all of a sudden we heard horses' hooves and my heart nearly stopped beating as a number of men galloped into the light of the fire across our lawn. Imagine our joy when we heard them give their yell and recognized our own dear men! They rode up to us and began asking Papa which way the Yankees had gone and then one came forward on his horse and leaped down and shook Papa by the hand. It was Captain Duquesne! Oh how glad I was to see him."

At the sound of his name Varna's heart missed a beat.

"Franklyn? Here in Vicksburg?" She could not suppress the question.

"I don't really know, darling," replied Lucy. "You see he didn't say where his troop—or is it regiment?—was stationed. They were all in so much haste, on the track

of the Yankees they said, and he swore to Papa he would make them pay dearly for burning the Hall. And just as he was going I told him you were here at Oakwood."

"What did he say?" Varna leaned forward and touched Lucy's arm.

"He—I don't remember he said anything," she faltered. "Except that he asked me to repeat the name of the house, and then he looked at our burning home with such a strange expression, and rode off with his men."

"Franklyn here in Vicksburg! Franklyn here. . . ." Varna paid little attention to her sister's story now for her heart seemed to be racing with the thought going round and round in her mind.

"And soon after they'd gone", Lucy continued, "the Yankee gunboats went past, and there were so many other fires down the river on both sides we could see them all as clearly as in daytime. The bombardment was terrific and I was simply terrified lest they should land on the levee here and come into the streets, and I was *crazy* imagining what might happen to you and poor little Tessa if the Yankees did come. Weren't you nervous? And wasn't Tessa frightened?"

"They didn't land," replied Varna calmly, "and as for Tessa, she didn't know anything about it. Katie Lou let her sleep through it all."

"The poor mite."

"But the *Magnolia* was sunk last night."

"Varnal! Why didn't you tell me? Is Roscoe safe?"

"Yes, indeed. He came home early this morning. They rammed that Yankee gunboat that was sunk."

Lucy's eyes shone.

"Oh Varna, did the *Magnolia* do that? Isn't it wonderful of him? Aren't you proud?"

"Of course, darling."

"You're *sure* Roscoe's safe? What happened when the boat sank?"

Varna gave a sisterly smile.

"He came in early this morning, drenched to the skin, of course," she explained. "He says after the *Magnolia* had gone down he swam around with a lot of Yankee soldiers while five or six—I forget how many—of their boats went past. And the shells from our forts were bursting all around them, and one fell in the water not far away——"

"But, Varna, he's not wounded, is he?" Poor Lucy could scarcely control her anxiety.

"Why no," Varna reassured her, laughing. "I do believe my husband enjoyed the experience. He seems to feel the loss of his old boat and the death of that Captain Hickman as much as anything. He declared that that old captain was the bravest man he's ever known."

"But where is he now, darling?"

"Roscoe?" Varna shrugged her shoulders. "After giving me the fright of my life, thinking he must be drowned, he ran in for an hour or so, and then went off to the forts, he said, to report for duty! He says that in spite of all the new guns they put in the batteries, Grant has managed to get most of his army past the forts, and now he'll attack us from the south."

"Oh my dear," exclaimed Lucy. "Does that mean we shall be surrounded?"

Varna ran the back of her hand across her forehead.

"I really don't know, Lucy dear," she said wearily. "I'm tired of all this frightful war and excitement. It spoils everything. I'm so tired of it all. Why can't the men stop it if they don't like it any more than we women do? One can't get a thing one needs nowadays: no silk or shoes, or smart bonnets. Why, I had to pay *twelve dollars* at Jepson's store on Harryson Street the other day for an entirely unfashionable bonnet trimmed with lilac berries. It looks quite sweet, but I wanted something much more suitable to go with that lavender organdie

dress Miss Clay made me. It was all the store had! And I haven't seen a dress from London, or even Paris, for ages! This war will drive us all crazy. Everybody can talk of nothing else these days."

"I'm so sorry," said Lucy blushing with contrition. "I've been talking too much again."

"That is all right, darling, I don't mean you." Varna patted her sister's arm. "I'm only too thankful we have this house for you and Papa and Aunt Debby to come to—although I always feel Oakwood is such a little house. But I'm not feeling too well this morning after all the excitement of last night and worrying about you all at Lorrimer, and I've got another of my sick headaches again. I'm not sure, mind you, darling, but I think, I've a suspicion, that I may be going to have——"

"Oh, another one?" Lucy almost clapped her hands with delight.

"Don't say 'another one' like that, Lucy," Varna admonished her. "Really, it sounds quite vulgar. One would think I made a habit of having babies regularly every ten months like poor Mrs. Tayleur!"

Lucy was too shocked to reply to that.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE Federal jaws were closing on Vicksburg. At first the removal of Major-General Grant's army from above the city to the higher ground below it seemed to make no difference to the Confederates, and General Pemberton did little beyond manning the trenches to the south of the city and laying more of the cruel barbed wire entanglements to stave off Grant's men. It was known that General Joseph E. Johnston was coming with another army straight from Richmond to drive the Yankees out of the Mississippi Valley, and he was not expected to be long, for he had already arrived in Jackson.

In the meantime the Yankees gave the Rebels many a reminder that the stars and stripes was now the only flag flown on the great river. Keeping just out of range of the Vicksburg batteries their gunboats patrolled the river in the daytime and slipped past quietly at dead of night, ready to pounce on any craft that dared leave the landing. Not a single Confederate boat plied on the river, except an occasional row boat stealthily taking a spy to the Louisiana shore under cover of darkness. Communication with the outside world came in only by spies, for the Yankees had command of the pike to Jackson, and the railroad had been captured at Bovina a few miles away, and several plantations destroyed and homes burnt round about. There was also a story that they had been out to Jeff Davis's own plantation at Brierfield and captured all the horses, that Grant had taken their President's finest Arab for his own use.

But nobody minded very much. Help would come as

soon as General Johnston arrived with his army from Jackson. He was less than forty miles away, and if he was as fine a man as his namesake—Albert Sydney Johnston—who had died at the battle of Shiloh, then the Yankees would soon be driven from around Vicksburg. Just a matter of a week or so, and as it was such lovely weather for the end of April, nobody could really mind having two armies of Yankees spread out in a semicircle around Vicksburg.

There was a certain amount of fighting in the bottom lands away to the south and when the casualties began to come in the hospital suddenly became full and several ladies kindly offered part of their houses for the poor wounded men. Deprived of any service on the river, Roscoe volunteered at once for medical duties and, still dressed in the shabby naval lieutenant's uniform which was about all the clothes he now possessed, he found more work than he could well manage in the hospital surgery. But if he laboured long hours under trying conditions in the sultry heat, working—so often quite hopelessly—to save the lives of men who had got beyond the wish to live, he was at least able to spend occasional nights at home with Varna. And now that the Hall was no more, the fields laid waste, and the woodyard a heap of ashes, he was glad to be able to offer the Colonel's family the hospitality at Oakwood which they had so readily given him at Lorrimer.

Colonel Quillon seemed to Roscoe to have altered noticeably during the past year. He had aged considerably and his face under its white hair had a drawn, deeply lined look which Roscoe had not noticed before. Since the surrender of New Orleans and the gradual advance of the Yankees down the river from the north the Colonel appeared to have foreseen the slow demolition of all their brave Southern hopes. With a doctor's knowledge Roscoe knew the old man had never really recovered from his

injuries in the *Cotton Queen* explosion, and when the first excitement and arrogance of the war had worn off and news of one Confederate defeat after another filtered through the grandiloquent Southern Press, John Quillon seemed to have given up hope of final victory and freedom for the South at the same time that he gave up hope of ever being an active man again.

Miss Deborah on the other hand accepted all their misfortune with a stoical courage which she explained one evening to Roscoe as he sat with her on the gallery overlooking the river. "I've expected this all along as I once told you," she said in her outspoken way, "and you were the only one who didn't believe I was crazy. I've always said there was a curse laid on the South for her sins of slavery, and now the day of retribution has come." She shrugged her shoulders. "Even the stars foretold that. And I see nothing but punishment for us in the future. It has been coming for a long, long time."

Roscoe forced a smile. "You sound a very gloomy prophet, if I may say so," he ventured. "You don't think our generals will have to surrender Vicksburg, do you, Miss Quillon?"

"Indeed I do," she said, fixing him with her keen eyes. "I tell you, Roscoe, the time is coming when the South will lie whipped and bleeding, as it has left so many of its slaves. We shall have everything taken from us, even our self-respect, and know the bitterness of humiliation."

"Ready to eat humble-pie, in fact," he suggested with a little malicious grin.

"Yes, whatever that expression means," she continued, gazing beyond him towards the hill where the batteries could be seen like grey monuments of stone. "First New Orleans, then Natchez-under-the-Hill, and Cairo and Memphis, and now it's to be Vicksburg to fall into the Yankees' hands. They have been sinks of iniquity and the wrath of God shall be visited upon them. And after

them others shall fall to the enemy, Richmond, Charleston, Atlanta and all the other cities of the South where people have been proud and defied the Lord. They shall fall to the dust."

Roscoe studied Miss Deborah's face in profile while she gazed before her. A kindly, refined face with a deep tenderness underlying the chiselled contours of her brow and nose and chin; but it was the face of a martyr, it had all the marks of fanatical belief and an iron will, and he knew it would be useless to argue with her. But he said: "I still can't quite believe we shall have to surrender to the Yankees. Look at those forts, they'll keep Grant's army out of the town if nothing else will."

She turned and flashed her eyes at him.

"Did they prevent the Yankees from getting past in their steamboats?"

"Admittedly, no. But then you see——"

"And if you hadn't rammed the first gunboat with your steamboat they would all have gotten by us."

"You credit me with an action of courage, Miss Quillon, that I most certainly didn't take," he told her smiling.

"Captain Hickman was in command and gave the order to close in and ram, while I just stood by and wished I was on dry land."

"Stuff and nonsense, young man," she said nodding her head. "You owned the *Magnolia*, didn't you? Then that's enough for me. I know a brave man when I see one, and—no," she added, holding up her hand, "don't interrupt. Those forts will no more save this city than a handful of Chinese crackers. Like the others, this city is doomed for its sins in the past. I've no faith in Johnnie Pemberton. I remember him as a little boy, you see, a nasty shiftless little boy with a sallow face and black eyes. 'Deed we girls always said he looked like a small Chinaman. He was always little Jefferson Davis's playmate and I suppose that's how he became a General. I tell you

Johnnie Pemberton ought never to be in command of an army, he's never been able to make up his mind on anything, and heaven help us if that rascal Grant really begins an assault on this city."

"I don't think he could break through our outer lines," Roscoe said reassuringly, "and then he's got General Johnston on the other side of him at Jackson. It won't be long before his army will be here, and then the Yanks will have to beat a retreat. We'll probably drive them down the river and perhaps recapture New Orleans from them."

Miss Deborah shook her head. "That's the right spirit, Roscoe," she said with a kindly smile, "but I don't see it happening. The Yankees have surrounded us and here we'll have to stay and starve, or give in."

When the very next day the news came through that General Johnston's forces had been driven back by Grant's men, and the last hope of an early salvation for the people of Vicksburg had been dispersed, Roscoe could not but be impressed by the almost infallible opinions of the Colonel's sister. It really seemed as though Miss Deborah had an uncanny insight into the immediate future, and he wondered gravely whether all her gloomy prophesies about the eventual ruin of the South and her complete annihilation by the Union armies and the paid hordes from Central Europe would really come to pass. There were times, indeed, when he could not help feeling that her words were very true; that he was taking part in the greatest tragedy that had ever beset the American nation, that he was witnessing the slow strangulation of a prosperous region of the country whose death would be no gain but only a dead loss to the most virile, promising nation on earth.

Remembering the peace and security of the English countryside as he had left it, he could have wept with bitterness at the senseless destruction that was going on

around him. If what Miss Deborah had said was to come true then sooner or later this pleasant Southern city, nestling between the curve of the Mississippi and the sandstone bluffs, would fall to Federal hands, and not a mile of the great river would belong then to the Confederates any more. That wonderful yellow monster on whose waters he had built up such hopes, had seen such adventures, was now but a desolate sea of memories of days that would never return. From its banks he had watched his wild schemes develop from a precarious existence at the old Palmetto Hotel in New Orleans to the Presidency of a prosperous line of steamboats. He had seen the great days when Mississippi steamboating had reached its heights, had played a part in the picturesque scenes at the crowded landings when business was to be had for the asking, passengers gladly paid high rates, and captains, pilots, owners and agents were able to live in fine houses with servants and cut-glass and all those comforts that make life pleasant.

And now, following the gradual change over of prosperity from the river to the new railroads, now had come this war between all the states, and the annihilation of commerce on the river. The steamboat companies had withered and died like roses in an Arctic blast, and the Telegraph Line would have been merely one other misfortune in a time of destruction and ruin, had not Roscoe and David Warner between them managed to lease both the *Telegraph* and the *Tidewater* to the Government for such rates as dreams are made of before New Orleans fell to the Federals.

"But just how much Confederate dollar bills will be worth at the end of the war", Warner had remarked with a shrewd smile as they discussed the deal in their Canal Street office, "isn't quite so encouraging. I guess we'd do better to invest in a blockade-running company. I hear they're making so much money they pay for the

entire boat and freight and everything in the first two trips, and everything else you make is sheer, beautiful profit."

At the suggestion Roscoe's face lit up and he clapped his partner on the back. "We could operate our own steamer," he said with his eyes shining like a boy confronted by a loaded Christmas tree. "There's nothing I'd like better than slipping in under the noses of the Yankee gunboats with cargoes for the army."

"Army!" Warner laughed. "To hell with the grey coats, my friend. They're busy fighting. This would be entirely a gallant expedition. We should serve the ladies, by bringing them what their dear little hearts desire: silks, satins, buttons, pins, stylish shoes, and crockery, perhaps glass. D'you know there isn't a single glass manufactory in the whole of this benighted South, and you can't replace a broken pane with all the dollars in the treasury? That's where the profits lie. You ship cotton out for Liverpool or New York—the Yankee mills are paying fifteen cents a pound for good-class cotton—and bring in cargoes to make the ladies' eyes dance. And they do dance when you're ashore with your pockets full of Confederate bills. I'm going to see another agent in Mobile who could sell us a share in a blockade runner to start with. Then later on we might build our own boat in England—a properly designed shallow-draught screw steamer with no upperworks or masts—bring her out to Nassau, and run in from there on dark nights. You could have command of her. How about it?"

Roscoe's eyes danced now even at the recollection of their talk, and as misfortune would have it here he was boxed up in Vicksburg, unable to get to Mobile or Savannah or Charleston, or any place where blockade running was in full swing. And he could get no communication through to Dave Warner to tell him where he was and learn what was happening. All he knew was that of the Gulf ports Mobile was the last to hold out against the

prowling attacks of the Yankee fleet. If only he knew what Warner was doing, whether he had lent the Company's funds for blockading expeditions or not, he would feel happier even though he might have to spend weeks or even months shut up in Vicksburg with the rest of Pemberton's men and the civilians, until help arrived from Richmond.

"Any way," he told himself in consolation, "I can trust Dave Warner, and if he fixes up a good deal we'll make as much money out of running in silks and buttons"—his mouth twitched at the thought—"as out of the palmier days of Mississippi steamboating. I needn't be ruined—a thorough failure—after all. And if our luck holds, by gad I'll be able to give Varna a big house once more and servants and everything the poor scatter-brained delightful little darling can possibly want! And I'll get Tessa a pony as soon as she's old enough to ride. I'm damned if I'm going to let this war make my family want."

Throughout the last hot and sultry days of May the city waited for something to happen. A sudden attack by Grant's troops had threatened with the rattle of musketry and the deeper roar of artillery, and with the news that the blue coats were closing in from the bottom lands to the south, women and children hurried to the Caves at the foot of the bluff. The Confederates abandoned their outer trenches, leaving the blue coats to scramble blasphemously over the barbed wire entanglements, and settled down in their rifle pits closer to the city confines. And long before the last of the firing died away the civilians crept out from the damp gloomy Caves and made their way to their homes, a little shamefaced under the ribaldry of the younger soldiers.

"Those damyankees are bringing up some heavy guns," the news went around at street corners and in the stores where news was masticated and emerged well mixed.

"God a'mighty, they dassn't shell innocent women and children!"

But they did. At ten o'clock one cloudless, sultry morning the first of the shells came whistling over, its fuse leaving a thin streak of grey against the sky, like a chalk mark on a blue ceiling, and they all heard it explode with a dull crash somewhere over near the railroad depot. Before the next shell traced its parabolic course across the heavens the Caves under the bluff were already filling up with hysterical women and children.

The sound of the explosion in the town caught Varna and Lucy at the corner of Randolph Street and Fifth Street as they were returning from the stores. Katie Lou was following with the treasured parcel of new linen that Varna had been able to buy ("The last you'll see, ma'm", the storekeeper had said, "for many a day") and her face went an ashen-grey at the sound.

"Miss Varn', Miss Lucy," she exclaimed, goggling. "Ah reckon we better be gettin' along home. You's gwine a git hurt ef you-all stan' right heah, dassa fac', Miss Varn', Miss Lucy." Clutching her parcel the coloured maid began to edge towards Jefferson Street, glancing back appealingly at the two young missies.

"I think Katie Lou's right, Varna dear," said Lucy in a little high-pitched voice, fighting a desire to pick up her skirts and run home.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Varna glancing at the sky. "They can't shell the town with *ladies* living here. And children, too. The ideal!"

As she spoke there came another distant scream that left another trail of smoke in the sky. And a second shell exploded with a muffled thud on the farther side of the town.

Lucy clutched her sister's arm.

"Oh my, I can't bear this!" she exclaimed. "We *must* go home."

"What's the use?" asked Varna as two soldiers appeared around the next corner escorting some ladies towards the Caves. "Supposing they drop a shell on to our house?"

The blood left Lucy's face and her grip tightened.

"Oh! *Could* they do that? Varna, they couldn't!" But she could see from Varna's expression that the Yankee gunners could, and even might. In an agony of apprehension she imagined Oakwood with its roof blown off a mass of red flames, like Lorrimer Hall that dreadful night. "But what can we do?" she pleaded after a pause. "We can't stay here."

"Go to the Caves, my dear," Varna replied with a wry smile, "and join the crowds there. I'm sure there won't be room to breathe there by now. And you remember when Papa showed us the Caves how moist the walls were. *Imagine* being jammed there with hundreds of po' whites and their dirty children from the waterside!"

Lucy looked wildly about her.

"Suppose the hospital was struck," she faltered.

"The hospital? Why that's way over the other side of the town," said Varna wondering.

"Yes, but suppose—Roscoe's there, isn't he?"

Varna gave a low laugh.

"Of course, child, he is. But they don't shoot at hospitals. Even the goddam Yanks haven't done that yet."

"But they might." Lucy gave a gasp of relief. "Thank goodness here's an officer coming. Maybe he'll take pity on us ladies and—why—why, look, Varna, if it isn't Captain Duquesnel!"

Varna found herself staring into Franklyn's dark eyes and he saluted her with something like mock gravity. Then she dropped her eyes, mad at herself for allowing the colour to mount to her cheeks. She knew she was colouring horribly and she knew he saw it, too, and he—blast him—was smiling with the faintly sardonic twist to his mouth that she had always found so fascinating.

"You're running great risks by being on the street like this, Mrs. Torrence," he said smoothly, and from the way he said it she knew he thought her a fool to be standing like that at a street corner while the town was being shelled. She wished she dared look him in the eye, make *him* feel embarrassed for once, and show him she wasn't frightened even if Lucy was. But he wasn't looking at her now, he was bowing to the younger girl.

"Your servant, Miss Lucy," he was saying in his suave voice. "You should not stay here, because a shell might possibly come over this way. Pray allow me to escort you to a safe place."

"I'm not going down into those caves," said Varna looking at him now.

"You're most wise," he replied, bowing towards her with a malicious glint in his eyes; "they're the safest place in Vicksburg but so damp. And in any case, entirely crowded by now, I should say, I can take you to a better place."

Varna tried to retain her aloofness, but she could no more still the beating of her heart nor take away the constricted feeling at her throat than she could drive the colour out of her cheeks. And she could feel his gaze on her, searching her innermost thoughts. It made her feel as though she were improperly clothed before him, and furious to find what lack of self-control his nearness caused her. Even when she spoke, as naturally as she could, her voice sounded querulous and not entirely her own.

"Where do you suggest we go then?" she asked, avoiding his eyes.

He took them to a grey brick building that looked like a military store and smelled of harness and oil and hay and horses. The sentry saluted as they entered, while Katie Lou was assured that she would be perfectly safe as another grinning Johnny Reb showed the coloured

girl to the back of the building. From her expression Katie Lou looked as though she was convinced that her last hour had come and she was not about to enjoy the experience.

"This is indeed an unexpected honour," Duquesne began when Varna had settled herself on a wooden bench with the skirts of her dress arranged about her. "I had the temerity to call at your old home, Mrs. Torrence, one evening at a very unfortunate time." He bowed towards Lucy, but kept his eyes mainly on Varna. "You will doubtless be relieved, or at least feel some satisfaction, to know that my men rounded up the Yankees that set fire to the Hall and they are now prisoners."

"Then I hope you shoot them all," exclaimed Lucy with sudden venom.

Duquesne smiled. "Or maybe, if we hand them over to you, Miss Lucy, you will deal with them."

"Oh, wouldn't I just," she cried, "after all they said and did! My, but I'd stick pins in their eyes, and—"

"Lucy!" Varna stared at the younger girl with surprise. Lucy pressed her finger-tips to her mouth and returned her sister's gaze with wide open eyes.

"Oh forgive me, Varna. And Captain Duquesne. I really—no I really didn't mean that." She looked away confused. "Perhaps imprisonment will be sufficient punishment. At least", and she swung round, colouring, "*I hope* it will be."

Duquesne laughed out loud, turning merry, flashing eyes on Varna. But she looked away, avoiding his gaze. What a pest this man is, she told herself; how I hate him. Or do I? I don't know. Really, I don't know. What on earth is the matter with me? I only feel like this when he's around, and I do wish I didn't. I *know* I don't love him. I'm sure I don't—I hope. It's really dreadful for me to suddenly begin to feel like this all over again. Really I thought I had gotten over it when Tessa was born,

and here I am going to become a mother again, at least I think so, I'm afraid, and the moment this man comes near I start right in getting all. . . . I really can't trust myself. La, la! I'll have to think of some excuse so that we can get out of here as soon as possible.

"Yes, indeed," she heard Lucy saying, "you arrived just in the nick of time, Captain Duquesne. I don't know what those Yankees might have done if you hadn't driven them off."

This is unbearable, though Varna, just listen to them conversing politely and all the while he's looking at me as if I was something good to eat. I feel all prickly down my back when he looks like that and gives that sharp little smile of his, and I do wish to heaven I could stop blushing. For heaven's sake, girl, get some control of yourself. Really, I scarcely dare look at him, for if I do I *know* my voice'll go all queer again. It's my heart; pounding like this. He still looks terribly handsome, but he's much thinner, far too thin, and he's changed a lot too, but just how I don't know. Good God, listen to that chatterbox!

"Yes, Captain Duquesne," Lucy was saying, "Dr. Torrence is at the hospital every day now. He says there are more wounded now because there's so much sniping."

"It's the long-distance shot that often finds its mark," remarked Duquesne as he darted a meaning glance at Varna, taking her by surprise. "The most impregnable position may be reduced by waiting, and the good general who seizes his opportunity gets what he wants in the end. Isn't that so, Mrs. Torrence?"

But Varna pretended not to hear. She felt the blood mounting to her cheeks again and she shifted restlessly on the bench. If only I knew what he meant by that remark and that look on his face, she thought, I'd either give him a piece of my mind or get up and go right out. Only he's not said anything personal really. Nothing I

could take offence at, and yet, does he imagine he could have me *now*, even if he had waited and waited for an opportunity? I ought never to have come here like this, it was a mistake letting him bring us here. What those sentries outside think, I just don't know. And if Roscoe knew—yes, if Roscoe knew. . . .

At the thought of him she suddenly sat up and looked across at Duquesne. The Confederate captain was showing Lucy an iron used for branding horses. As though for the first time she noticed the state of his uniform, the dirty piece of string holding the coat together where three buttons had gone, the torn pocket and the frayed collar, the hole at the elbow and the stained lapels. His coat was no longer grey—she remembered how smart he had looked in it when he had ridden off to the war—it was faded to a greyish-green, and the C.S.A. badges on his shoulders looked as if they hadn't been cleaned for weeks. Her eyes travelled down the baggy legs of his trousers, noticing where a rent at his knee had been clumsily sewn up with twine ("How helpless the poor dears are," she smiled to herself, "without us women to sew and darn for them") and she was horrified to notice that his feet were encased in an odd pair of canvas boots which looked as if they had been made by some one who had never seen a boot before. ("I wouldn't give boots like that to one of the servants even," she told herself.)

He noticed her expression and smiled.

"Admiring my uniform, Mrs. Torrence?" he said lightly, running his slender hands down the stained front of the coat. "It's been through the wars, I fear, and this coat has lost some of its pristine smartness. But," he laughed suddenly with his mouth, "you should see some of the troops. They look like they've robbed scarecrows."

Varna tried to smile while he looked at her, his eyes dark and mirthless, but she only found herself grinning,

like a mask in a Greek comedy, and suddenly she wanted to get up and scream.

"He's changed, he's entirely changed," she thought as she gripped the folds of her dress and stared at his shabby clothes. "This isn't Franklyn, not the Franklyn that came to my window that night and begged me to marry him; not the Franklyn that took me away the morning of my wedding. I would have gone to the ends of the earth with him then, but now—he's different, altered. He's hard now, and toughened from what he's been through, he's so much thinner, too, too thin. He doesn't smile like he used to with that merry little twist at the corners of his eyes. He only smiles with his mouth. He looks so much older too. His hands look hardened, coarsened as if they've been made to do hateful, cruel things, like killing frightened men . . . and they used to be so smooth and gentle."

She wondered whether they could ever be smooth and gentle now; wondered what those hands would feel like if they touched her, gently at first, moist and trembling with desire, and then suddenly firm, masterful, holding her tight. . . . Oh, I mustn't, I really mustn't think like that, she told herself. Never, never again. I must never think of him in that way any more. It's all over now. He might have had me once; I would willingly have given myself to him, I think, once upon a time, if he had insisted. But now—he's so different. The war's made him so, hardened him. I can see he's cold and cynical now and he doesn't care. He would take anything that he could get now and then—and then go on his way and forget about me. He's probably—oh God, must I think this?—he's probably done that to lots of women already. Oh how changed he is. I suppose I must be too, I don't love him now. Not like I used to. I don't love him at all now. Not the teeniest little bit. I would have been his slave once. Fancy being ready to run off like that with

him an hour or two before my wedding, and without a change of clothes or anything! I must have been crazy. And yet he had that effect on me. But now—she tried to look at him as though she had never seen him properly before, while he continued talking to Lucy—now, she could not even imagine wanting to run away with him.

Varna smiled to herself, enjoying a feeling of relief deep down inside her. She knew what it was, she had been infatuated these last years with a fantasy, a figure of her own imagination, not with the real Franklyn Duquesne. She had been in love with some one she had conjured up, like an aura, about the person of Franklyn Duquesne, and now suddenly it seemed as though the magic glasses had been taken from her eyes and she saw him as he was, a hardened, coarsened, cynical man who even yet hoped to capture her. The idea! Thank God, she thought, she was no longer attracted to him, no longer a tool in his hands. The excitement she had experienced when they first met just now had worn off, and in future she would be glad that she had Roscoe. . . . The thought of his name brought a warm feeling surging into her heart, and she wondered if he was at this moment tending the sick and the wounded with those gentle hands of his. She had been very beastly to him, never really giving herself to him, while all this time he had been so kind, so thoughtful and considerate for her feelings. She had been fond of him all along, she realized that now, had admired him for his courage and cheerfulness, his mastery over her, and all those things that one wanted in a man, but she had never felt about him as she thought she had felt about Franklyn. But now—she suddenly felt like a little girl at a party who has become bored with the company and cries to be taken home.

"I think they must have stopped shelling," she said, getting up. "We ought to be going now, Captain Duquesne. My husband may be wondering. . . ."

She could not say any more. Something rose up in her throat, choking her, and she put her hand there to stop it. Duquesne noticed the movement and his eyes glittered. Lucy was looking at her, too, her eyes darting from Duquesne's face to her own with an expression of dismay in their depths.

She thinks I'm still in love with him, thought Varna. Oh why must she think that? I'm not. I'm not.

"Yes, I think the bombardment must be over for to-day," he remarked. "There have been no shells over for a quarter hour or so. It has been such a pleasant interlude," he added, bowing with a mocking smile, "that I hope during the next bombardment you will allow us to protect you-all here again."

"But do you think there'll be another bombardment?" asked Lucy, startled.

Captain Duquesne glanced at Varna.

"I hope so," he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN the scorching sunshine the blue flags hung listless against the cloudless sky, and on the streets men and women stood about in groups with nothing to do but meet on the corners and talk of the war, of the Yankee shells, of the chance of Lee sending help from Virginia, and of food. The early excitement when the Yankees had begun their bombardment of the town at ten o'clock regularly every morning soon evaporated. The first rushes of panic-stricken civilians to the Caves were killed by ridicule, by the jests of the soldiers. "Come on, rats, scurry into yo' holes" and coarser advice kept many sensitive women away a second time, and gradually none but the most timid thought about the Caves when the shells came over. They preferred to be on the streets with their friends to shivering in the dank gloom of the Caves.

On the streets at the first scream of a shell ladies would look up and watch its course across the sky. If it was going over to another part of the town, gossip would continue uninterrupted. But if the missile looked like falling too near for comfort, skirts would be plucked up, and the menfolk, in diving also for the shelter of a building, would have a momentary glimpse of white lace and pretty ankles that would help them forget how hungry they all were.

Food became the main topic of conversation, mule meat and preserved sausages, and the coarseness of corn bread. But although belts were tightened in and many ladies were delighted by their reduced waist lines, the scarcity of food was still treated with good humour and

a certain grim philosophy. One day as he hurried to the hospital Roscoe watched two daintily stepping army mules drawing a cart into the barracks and chuckled at the remarks two Johnny Rebs made to one another:

"Reckon them bastuds hadn't ought to be made to work no longer."

"Kinda gotten powerful soft-hearted, ain't you, Fred?" asked his friend.

"Naw. I'm jest figgerin' it ain't fair to let four square meals git past us like that."

It was getting like that. Mule meat and corn bread, an occasional potato, a little scraggy bacon fetching five dollars the pound at the store on Chiney Street, and delicacies passing into the memory of lost pleasures, one by one. Children cried, poor women, as is the role of women with large families, worried and scolded and complained to their neighbours, and the men—just like men—loafed around the stores, chewing anything in place of tobacco, spitting, cussing the shortage of everything, and just waiting for something to turn up.

At home Roscoe began to notice a change in his wife, and though he could not understand any particular reason his soul rejoiced. He thought it was possibly the daily bombardments that had had some effect on Varna, reminding her, perhaps, that a stray shell might easily take him from her; for she had been warm and affectionate towards him the night following that first shelling. He remembered the day well, and they had been happy together that night, really happy, it seemed, for the first time since they were married. If Lucy noticed any change in her sister she did not mention it, but went about her self-appointed tasks of making bandages for the hospital out of the last remaining scraps of cloth, and helping other ladies of the town to feed starving families, as though nothing had happened. And she never made any reference to their meeting with Captain Duquesne. Varna

avoided the subject, but she wondered just how much of the truth Lucy guessed.

"I've never known such a dear, kind-hearted girl as Lucy," Roscoe remarked one night when he was alone with Varna. "She really has all the virtues of an angel."

And Varna pinched his chin with a playful look in her smouldering eyes. "A nice way to describe another woman to your wife, sir," she said laughing softly. "But you're right, my dear, Lucy's entirely too good to live in this world."

The next morning Roscoe was sent for by the officer in command of the barracks. Major Emerson was a short, bald-headed man with a bushy grey beard, square shoulders and soft brown eyes.

"Doctor Torrence," he began without any preliminaries, "a man has died in one of those cabins by the waterfront. I want you to examine the body, as we don't like the symptoms."

When Roscoe had made his examination, he looked up with a grim expression.

"Yellow Jack," he said in a low voice.

"Yellow Jack! My God," exclaimed the Major, glancing around him as though he expected the dread monster to reach out and clutch him. "We'll have these cabins cleared and any other precautions you doctors recommend taken. You've had experience of the plague, Dr. Torrence?"

Roscoe nodded.

"Plenty," he said. My God, he thought, if Yellow Jack gets a hold here in this besieged city, crowded with troops as it is, it'll spread like wildfire in this hot weather, it'll sweep through the town. The horror of the thing that had suddenly reared its head in their midst made him temporarily sick. He thought he had already seen enough of the ravages of the plague for one lifetime.

"We've got to keep this quiet," said Major Emerson,

when they were outside in the grilling sunshine again, "or else it'll mean a panic."

"Quiet!" Roscoe stared at the officer. "How the blazes do you think we can keep anything like this a secret?"

Major Emerson was not to be nonplussed.

"These folks'll believe most anything," he said crisply. "Tell 'em it's through drinking river water that's been poisoned with Yankee blood. Anything, Doctor, but what it really is. We'll just have to rely on you doctors now."

The scorching days of June had nearly run their course. And like a festering sore hidden in the heart of the town where the poor white families lived huddled together in their broken-down shacks, the plague gripped one after another in its foul hands. Pledged to a secrecy that daily became more difficult to ensure, Roscoe worked with the other doctors of the city, separating the stricken from the living, dispelling fears with explanations of "bad food", "decayed meat", even getting the simple people to believe the story of the poisonous Yankee blood in the river water.

But the pestilence spread because the fear of panic prevented the doctors from taking the stringent precautions they would have liked, and suddenly its foul breath passed into houses in the better parts of the town. There were two cases in Clay Street, but five blocks from his own house. Negroes had contracted it and Lord knew where they might take the disease or what their friends might do to cure them. Roscoe began to have visions of the plague raging through the city as he had seen it rage in the stinking hold of the *Black Arrow*. He dared not tell Varna of the risks she ran when she took Katie Lou with her to the stores, protesting that only she could get around the shop people to let them have better food than mule meat; he was too fearful of what effect the news would have on Varna in her present fix. He was not

going to risk that, he decided, and in any case in a few weeks she would not be able to appear on the street at all, for her condition would soon begin to show. But he decided to tell Lucy of the plague the authorities were fighting, and when the first shock of horror had died away she agreed to say nothing to her sister, but to endeavour to keep her from going to the more crowded parts of the town. The girl's courageousness and good sense affected Roscoe strongly.

"Dear Lucy," he said, patting her shoulder in deep gratitude, "I don't know what I should do without you. You seem to help me in all my most difficult problems."

"That is what I hope I'll always be able to do, dear Roscoe," she said simply. It is all a sister-in-law can ever hope to do, she added to herself when he had gone.

The next day a negro died on Jefferson Street, less than a block from Oakwood. When he heard of it Roscoe's face took on a grim look and he hurried to Major Emerson. There is nothing like having a danger brought near his home to make a man act.

"Take me to General Pemberton," he said when he got to the barracks.

"Is it urgent, Doctor? You know how the General is right now."

"It is. Very."

General John C. Pemberton was a short puffy man with an indeterminate mouth and jet-black eyes peering from a sallow, clean-shaven face. He rose from behind a table as Roscoe was shown into the room.

"You want to see me, Doctor," he said in an unexpectedly high-pitched voice, "about this epidemic? We're in a pretty bad way, are we?"

"General," said Roscoe gravely, "I've come here with a plea that as a military man you won't like, and in the ordinary way I wouldn't make. But the Yellow-Jack's gaining on us in spite of all we can do. It's gone beyond

the waterside, and one of the girls in Madame Brown's on Chiney Street is down with it. God knows if any of her other girls has got it yet. You realize", he added, looking General Pemberton straight in the eye, "how it might spread amongst your troops."

The General nodded, pressing the tips of his fingers together. Naturally slow of mind and speech he was not ready with any comment while Roscoe hurried on.

"We've finished all our disinfectants. There's nothing but river water left to wash the filth away, and we've *got* to get medical supplies in pretty soon."

"You've had experience of Yellow Jack before, Doctor?"

Roscoe nodded. "Yes. Aboard a slave ship."

"A slave ship?" The black eyes opened wider.

"I know what I'm talking about," Roscoe added, ignoring the question in Pemberton's voice, "and I'll tell you, General, if you want to save your men and the people of Vicksburg from dying of this plague, you'll surrender."

Pemberton sat up.

"You must leave such a decision", he said coldly, "to us military men, Doctor."

"I appreciate that, but I'm telling you, General, that if it isn't stopped this plague will reduce Vicksburg if General Grant won't. And even the Yankees are the lesser evil."

General Pemberton's gaze roved around the room, avoiding the Doctor's eyes. "My men can hold out," he said, as though speaking to the opposite wall. "This city could hold out another month at least. Meanwhile General Jackson will doubtless get reinforcements from Virginia and break through the Yankee lines. Our defences are fine and Grant can't get any closer. So you see, Dr. Torrence, we can afford to sit here and wait, if only you can keep the plague at bay."

"It's no good." Roscoe shook his head. "Either we get more medical supplies or Vicksburg will become a plague spot." Then suddenly the tension broke and his patience was gone. "Good God, General," he exclaimed, bringing his fist down with a crash on the table. "Don't you realize what it means to vacillate now? You've got thirty thousand men cooped up in this town and about three thousand civilians. Are you thinking of condemning hundreds, no thousands, of them to death by plague when you can save them by getting them the supplies they need?"

"But that, sir, means surrendering."

"It means surrendering. It means letting in the Yankees. But by God, General, it means saving hundreds of innocent people whose lives are in your hands." Roscoe paused, eyeing the sallow face opposite him. "We can't keep going till help arrives from General Lee. Richmond is too far away, and the Yankees wouldn't let any of our men through. We can't sit here, General, letting our wives and children starve, while Yellow Jack spreads through the streets. Good God, on the very street where my own wife and child are living a negro died yesterday, and to-morrow, perhaps, in the house next to your own. . . ." He paused while General Pemberton sat back resting his clenched hands on the table and biting his lower lip.

"You must give us army men credit", the General said at last, "for knowing more about the military situation than you doctors. You have brought alarming news about the plague situation, and I'll have to confer with my staff officers. Meantime I rely on you and your colleagues to do all you can to keep this thing down. I'll give it three days more before making my final decision, whether to hold out, or"—he dropped his voice—"surrender for the sake of the women and children. I wish you good day, Dr. Torrence."

Two days later, the last day in June, there was a truce. No shells came over from the Yankee guns all that morning; men and women stood in groups on all the streets, talking of the impending surrender, waiting for word from the army officers. In the stifling heat at the hospital Roscoe worked in the temporary ward, the sweat streaming down his lean face while he tended the fever-racked patients.

"Roscoe."

A hand touched his arm. He turned and started.

"Lucy! You mustn't come *here!* For God's sake, girl, you might get the plague!"

"I know. But I had to come. I've run all the way." She was breathless, and her cheeks were flushed from hurrying. He saw that she hadn't even stopped to put on her bonnet. "Do please come at once. Varna—" She put her hand to her throat.

"What, Lucy?" He stared down at her. "What's the matter?"

She looked up with eyes filled with agony.

"Roscoe, come at once. Varna—the—the *plague!*"

"There is nothing more to be done," he said wearily. "You go and take some rest now. I'll stay with her."

Lucy paused at the door and turned her drawn face towards him. "You will call me when you want me again, won't you?" she whispered. "She's a little better, isn't she?"

Roscoe hesitated, looking at the patient. "Yes, my dear. I think she is—a little better. Thank you for all you've done."

When Lucy had gone to her own room Roscoe sat beside his wife and gently sponged her face with a cool damp cloth. For four days the fever had racked her and she had tossed and turned, moaning in delirium on the soaked sheets of the bed. And for four days, with hardly any rest or sleep, Lucy had bathed her sister's face and

wrists, nursing her during the day while Roscoe, hollow-eyed and as weary as she, went to fulfil his duties amongst the sick and the wounded at the hospital.

He had watched so many others die like this that he scarcely dared hope that Varna would recover. Yet now it seemed as though the fever were a little less, and he watched her lift an emaciated arm and press the back of her hand to her forehead.

"Roscoe. Are you there?"

Her voice came suddenly into the still room like a hoarse whisper from death. He bent closer straining his ears.

"Yes I'm here, darling. What is it?"

"Roscoe." She turned her head slowly on the pillow without opening her eyes. "Will the fields be very green now? Your fields, at home in Kent?"

He took her burning hand and held it gently in his own. "Yes, my darling. The hedges and woods would be full of flowers now," he said wondering.

"And the cute little cottages." Her voice scarcely rose above a whisper. "Are they covered with rose vines too?"

"Why yes, my darling."

"I love roses. Red, red ones. I dreamt of roses just now. We—you and I, Roscoe—were standing in a lovely old garden, it must have been your home, and the house, such a dear quaint English house, had a door covered with lovely red roses. You are going to take me there, aren't you, Roscoe? England is like home to me now."

He pressed her hand, unable to speak.

"Have the Yankees gone away?" she asked with an effort. "Everything is so quiet now. Those detestable scum must know we have beaten them. Have they all gone back North?"

Roscoe smiled grimly. Yesterday Pemberton had sur-

rendered; the white flags had crept limply up the staffs on the hill and the Yankees had swarmed into the town with their band playing the "Star Spangled Banner". The blue coat soldiers had come laughing and cheering, with their hats held aloft on bayonet points, greeting the hollow-eyed Confederates with good-natured chaffing. "Hallo, Rebs, how's the gals in Vicksburg?"

"Fahn, Yanks. How're you all?"

"Fine too, Johnny. Have some hard tack?"

He had seen them sharing their hard rations with the hungry grey coat boys, seen them fraternizing as if there had never been a war. They're all Americans, he had said to himself, all sons of the same great country, at heart, and yet, God knows, this won't be the end of the war. Independence Day 1863: what a date for the surrender of Vicksburg, what a day for fate to choose for the Confederacy's last hope in the west to be lost! Why, he had thought, this war may go on for months, even years yet, and only the gods know what will be the outcome of it all. And he had returned home to find his wife still racked by the plague fever.

"You have been so good to me, Roscoe," she whispered. "Always so kind. When I get well again—when I get well, I'll be a better wife to you, Roscoe. I won't think any more—I don't want to think about," she hesitated, her parched lips trembling, "about Franklyn any more, dearest. You have always been so good to me, Roscoe. Always so kind."

"But not quite", he smiled, "a perfect Southern gentleman."

She opened her eyes then, trying to look at his face so near to hers.

"Yes, oh indeed, yes, Roscoe, you have. You've always been a perfect gen'leman with me." She tried to smile, twisting her mouth into a shape that hurt him to watch. "When we are home in England, in the green woods and

the cornfields, you'll have to be an English country gen'leman then, won't you? It will be such fun learning to be an English lady. . . ."

Then her head lapsed on the pillow again and with the heaviness of dread in his heart Roscoe watched the fever take possession of her once more.

Towards the end of the seventh night Varna lay silent and still while the life slowly ebbed from her exhausted body. The hours dragged by like nights of misery; even the drone of the insects in the garden had ceased as though they too bowed their heads in contemplation.

The room was in darkness save for the steady glow of the nightlight beside the bed. As Lucy removed the moist bandage from her sister's brow and laid a fresh one, cool from the basin, in its place her shadow played across the wall like the black spectre of despair. Yet her features as she bent over the still face on the pillow wore an expression of peace, a peace born of resignation to the will of the Lord. Her hands looked caressing in the half light, and as she moved her skirts rustled softly.

From outside, suddenly, the thin notes of a bugle cut the air, a Yankee bugle call. She looked up and her eyes caught Roscoe's, watching her. He turned his head away, and as the dim light fell on his face she was shocked by the change that had come over him. He looked like a weary old man.

"I am glad," he said slowly, his voice barely audible, "I am glad she doesn't know we had to surrender. How she has always hated the Yankees."

They both looked down at Varna. Lucy passed the tip of her tongue across dry lips.

"Is—is there no hope," she whispered, "after all?" Yet she dreaded his answer.

And when he replied it was with a note of reverence in his voice:

"There is nothing more we can do now but watch and hope. The rest is in God's hands. He—He may even yet be merciful."

He drew back the curtain and looked out at the window. The grey light cast a chill radiance in the room, paling the candle's flame and deepening the shadows beyond.

"You had better go and wake your father," he suggested as he sank into a chair with his head in his hands. "He would want to be here . . . at the end."

For a moment Lucy hesitated, her heart beating with tenderness for him. Then she came silently to him across the room, and taking his head in her hands drew him towards her.

"Why must it happen like this?" The despair in his voice cut deep into her. "Why must fate take her away now, when she was at last happy with me? I wanted so much to make her happy. As soon as this war is over we were going back to my home—home to England. . . ." In that moment he seemed to Lucy to have become a bewildered, frightened little boy needing to be comforted, and with her good woman's heart aching for him she began to stroke his hair with loving hands.

"Dear, dear Roscoe," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "It is the will of God. We cannot tell why, we can only obey and have faith in Him. God has chosen you to endure this trial because in His wisdom He knows you to be strong."

Suddenly she was on her knees beside him holding his hands between her own.

"Roscoe, look at me. I am only a weak girl without any experience of the world, and maybe I'm just a foolish girl to talk so when fate seems so cruel to you. But Roscoe," her eyes searched his face, "I love you. I have always loved you, and your sorrow is my sorrow, too. Whatever strength I have, dear Roscoe, is yours, to help

you to bear this cross. For Jesus said: 'Oh man, greatly beloved, be strong, yea, be strong.' "

As he turned towards her there came to him a sense of peace, of thankfulness, that had not been his since he was a child. And he wept.

The room was lighter now, and the song of birds awakening came softly through the window.

It was the dawn of another day.

THE END

